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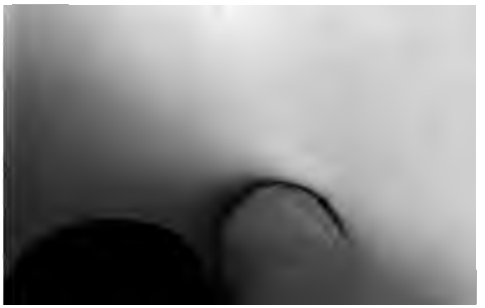
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BROMLEY NEIGHBORHOOD



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BROMLEY NEIGHBORHOOD

BY

ALICE BROWN

Author of "The Prisoner," "Children of Earth," etc.

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BROMLEY NEIGHBORHOOD

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I

When this story begins, the youngest of those who are to act in it were little more than children, not so much in years as from the extreme quietude of their lives. They lived in Bromley, a country neighborhood, part of a New England township of that name, where everybody took back to English ancestry and clung, with unthinking tenacity, to old habits of thought. Beckenham was only five miles away, and that was an academy town for boys and girls; but even the Academy was of a former type where the classics were taught with an old-fashioned religiosity, and industrial education had made no inroads. The story begins on the afternoon of a spring day. And this is right: for unless you take people in the spring of the year, you hardly know what urge and emotional drive can actuate them; and the late afternoon is a time to study them in their unthinking ease, the stress of day being more nearly over. Then you are ready for them in their activities next morning.

Mary Neale, who lived in a large and prosperous house, of a Georgian type, was looking about her kitchen in its just completed order and judging that she might go over to the little house that was her neighbor, to see how its mistress, Ardelia Brock, had borne the day. Mary was the wife of Thomas Neale, a farmer of landed ease, and she was used to "help" in her kitchen, Hannah Drake who lived not far down the road with her brother, True-

man, who was Thomas Neale's hired man on the farm. These two had a small house and a little land, and they were silent, strong, lean-visaged New Englanders, possessed by a passion for work. Activity was their normal state. No one, in daylight, ever saw them resting. Their madness was to get something laid by: though no result would have eased their minds like the pains that led to it. Mary Neale was glad, on the less busy days, to get Hannah out of the kitchen. Hannah was tolerant of proprietary activities, but she did, after her fourteen years' service in it, regard the kitchen as her own; and Mary now, glancing at the windows where the woodbine tapped, and letting her gaze run over the unmown fields, thought it the pleasantest room in the house. Sometimes she wished for a little less prosperity, so that she could do her work all the time. But that wish was never uttered. It would have offended Thomas, who was set on higher dignities, and sternly anxious to get on. She heard him now, calling her, and stood perversely still, wondering what would happen if, at some time when he so imperiously summoned, he got no answer. She was a comely, almost a heroic figure, standing there in her pose of strength, a woman built on large lines, of flowing curves and yet not an abundant flesh. Her blonde hair was parted and went waving back from her face, to be confined in a heavy coil. She was fair, of velvety skin; her eyes were serene and her chin firm. She looked the mother, of an old-fashioned type. The eyes were of those that gaze out at us from dim portraits, and no one, perhaps not even the painter or the owner of the eyes herself, knows their serenity is attained by the goading of a persistent will.

"Mary!" came the loud, imperious voice. "Mary!"

She did not move. A slight flush ran into her cheeks,

and her eyes brightened. She was as still as some wood creature in its defensive trance. Only when the voice came nearer, to the tune of striding feet, did she break her pose and seem to waken to the need of answering.

"Yes," she called. The tone was even silky, in its innocence. "I'm in the kitchen."

The striding steps came on, and Neale's tall, tight-knit form came to the doorway and seemed to fill it. He was a gaunt, big man, nearly fifty, his face keenly interrogative, his eyes stern. They looked out questioningly, Mary sometimes thought, as if they were asking who meant to withstand his will. If he found anybody, the eyes said, he would make short work even of the possibility. Really he was a handsome man, his shaven face of a noble contour, and in any country assembly eyes turned toward him at his entrance and lingered on him. Perhaps they did not always note that his firm lips were slightly too thin. He stood there frowning a little, one hand above him on the casing of the door. Yet he was looking pleasantly enough at Mary. Only it was his habit to frown with the intentness he gave to even the small demands of life. To him they were never small. He would have things scrupulously ordered.

"D'you go into Ardelia Brock's?" he inquired. His voice, deep enough but somewhat dry, was imperious in a negative way. He was so sure of getting what he wanted.

"Yes," said Mary. She was looking down at her hand, studying it apparently but only perhaps to avoid looking at him.

He had no doubt of the honesty of her intent.

"You hurt your hand?" he inquired, frowning a little more. It always seemed to him foolish to get into difficulties.

"No." She dropped it at her side, and now, conscious of her feint, she blushed a little.

"Well," he continued, in some impatience at a waste of time over nothing, "what'd she say?"

"Nothing."

"Nothin'? You asked her, didn't you?"

Mary did not answer for perhaps a whole minute, and she was alive to the length of the interval, irritated by it, too, because she could hear the clock from the sitting-room, and it seemed to be ticking away her reprieve.

"No," she said then, in a low, reluctant tone. "I didn't ask her. I couldn't."

"Didn't ask her?" His voice sounded naïve in its betrayal. He hadn't quite realized he could even suggest anything that would not instantly be done. "Why didn't you?"

A beautiful flush ran into her face. She seemed, in the glow of it, to make a little forward movement toward him, an entreating of her whole body, a suppliance so warm that it was difficult to see how any man could resist it.

"Thomas, I couldn't. Only you think. Her husband buried yesterday. To ask her to sell the place."

He stood considering her, in a perfect obtuseness to another point of view. He was not even meeting her wonderful flush and entreating charm with any recognizing warmth of his own. "Yes," he might have said, "I see, Mary. I know how much you feel it. But—" Then they would have gone on discussing it, he as implacable and she as reluctant as before; but there would have been between them that consonant note, modulating their differences to another key.

"Well," he said, "she don't have to sell it unless she wants to. There's no harm findin' out whether she wants to, is there?"

"But, Thomas, so soon. It's just as if —" she hesitated, and then the tide of her emotion rose again. "What if it had been you and me, and somebody came to me and asked me to sell—" She stopped. His face had darkened in a threatening way. She remembered too late that a hint of his own departure from the world where he held so tight a rein always mysteriously offended him.

"You go over there to-night," he said, "an' have a talk with her. I happen to know there's one or two thinkin' of that place. She needn't come to any conclusions now. Only get me the refusal. She needn't sign anything, tell her — not for a day or two."

He turned away, not waiting for consent, it was so inevitable to him, and Mary's gaze followed him out of the room. But hearing his steps through the shed to the stable and his quick call to one of her sons, she went on into the sitting-room and sat down by the front window where she could just see the corner of Ardelia Brock's house. Mary's little sewing table was in front of her, and on it a billowing pile of unfinished work. She liked the nearness of the table, even when she had no mind to sewing. She knew then, if her husband came in, she could draw the soft, absorbing stuff toward her and, her eyes bent on it, talk to him, whatever topic he introduced, the more at ease. He never proposed light subjects that needed no consideration, either of her concurrence or soft preambles of almost incredible retreat. But now, her serious gaze on the corner of Ardelia Brock's little house, her mind was indubitably there, though it never ran far enough from her husband to dull her sensitiveness toward what he was sure to feel and think. Ardelia's house stood for an old discontent in the Neale family. Thomas Neale's grandfather had been a warm-natured, generous man, given to seeing other-worldly values to the irritating

exclusion of present ones. He had taken compassion on David Brock, the grandfather of the David just now dead, living in a one-room shack and taking weekly trips to his courting which had no chance of being ended, and had told him he would give him a building lot out of his own farm, and lend him the money to put up a house. It was incredible, even in that country town where everybody was kind but never thought of crossing the line of customary benevolence, that any landowner should do such an unheard-of deed. But the fact was accepted until Tom Neale's son grew up and then, suddenly, after the death of his father, he made it known that three acres out of the corner of his own front lot was an eyesore and an abomination, and he asked the Brock then inheriting, after the first owner, to sell the land. David the second was precisely like his father, earnest, hard working, but with an uncertain clutch that let opportunity slip, and he replied, in even a wounded earnestness, that the land was his and he had his family to support and couldn't sell. So it had been with the present Neale. On coming into his inheritance he had strenuously objected to the square cut out of his broad frontage, and begun, with the force of an inherited passion, to make offers for the land. But the Brocks had a sentiment for it. They were men of sentiment, of a shy sort, and it seemed to them just like a story that they had got their land by such an incredible gift — the more incredible because so many Neales wanted to take it back again, proving that old Tom Neale was one of a kind — and neither would the third Brock sell. And now he was dead and Thomas Neale thought his widow, in her poverty, might be prevailed upon, and was sending his wife to make inquiry. Mary had truly tried to ask the question last night when she went in, but Ardelia had received her so gladly, so touched, in a wistful way, because Mary

had come to her, that she had not been able to deliver her sordid errand. And she saw no better prospect of it now.

As she sat and thought, her brows knit, her mouth set, she shook her head impatiently, hearing Aunt Tab singing formlessly in a room above. It made it harder for her to think. Aunt Tab was Neale's sister, unmarried, older than he, and of a shrinking disposition that irritated him exceedingly. He had never known a Neale to be shy and quavering, and it filled him with a distaste he did not utter but which was so apparent to Tabitha that she kept her room most of the time when he was in the house and even, if there was a hot day or a cold day to give color to it, said she didn't feel like eating, and stole down to the kitchen after it was cleared up for the afternoon and pecked at the cooling dishes in the pantry. Hannah knew quite well what to expect on the days when Aunt Tab failed to appear at table, and left choice morsels conspicuous on a plate. Once Mary Neale came on her feeding delicately in the pantry, and thought now was the time to ask her not to be so foolish, to show some spirit and come to the table and face it out. What "it" was, both she and Tabitha would have known perfectly. "I wish—" she began, and Tabitha, a morsel of lamb poised on her fork, turned on her eyes so full of a startled apprehension that she let the spirit of her sentence ignominously die, and finished, "I wish you'd tell me whether you think the pie is sweet enough." Mary believed Tabitha knew what that sentence was meant to be, and she covered it still deeper in oblivion by proffers of cream on the pie and a bit of cheese. Aunt Tab was, the neighbors said, a nice body. She had old-fashioned bonnets stored away in the attic and chests of bed-linen and old counterpanes. Mary thought of these hoarded

possessions with a nervous dislike, and wished Aunt Tab would give them away or turn them into the common stock. They seemed almost unbearably pathetic, belonging to a woman who had no house of her own and was living in the room upstairs because her father's will had left her a home with Thomas. She had this habit of low singing, not unpleasant, though she never accomplished a tune, and Mary found something pathetic in that, too. It never seemed to give Aunt Tab any satisfaction. It might have been her way of announcing herself to a world that was unlikely to welcome her. "Here I am," it said. "Not quite a guest, yet not your kin. Don't say anything you'd rather I shouldn't hear."

But Mary was really taking stock, in a way, of her intercourse with her husband, and remembering she had never deceived him in words. There had been a time when she had hoodwinked herself to the point of believing she never wanted to deceive him; but that had passed. It had slipped away before she missed it, and this was a moment when she knew, actuated by her sympathy for Ardelia Brock, how much she wanted to deceive. A running step came from without and Ben, her youngest son, flung into the sitting-room with a question on his tongue:

"Are you going to do it?"

He was seventeen, tall, weedy, with a wistful twist of the brows and a peculiarly radiant look in blue-gray eyes. He had a fine aquiline profile, of his father's cast, but he was of his mother's coloring, gold in the hair, and with the creamy skin a blonde girl might have coveted. There was something willful in his air and his way of asking her. Usually she felt she had to answer his questions, chiefly because they were so audacious; but now she took the oblique course of asking another.

"[illegible]?"

"Ask Ardelia Brock to sell him her place."

"I wish," said Mary, vaguely annoyed, "you wouldn't call your father 'him.'"

"I don't always," said Ben. A quizzical look ran over his face and ended in a smile, disclosing two dimples he hated. "Sometimes I say 'he.' When I speak to him I say 'you.'"

"I ought," said Mary, rising, "to have punished you more."

He slipped his arm about her waist.

"Are you going to do it?" he pursued. "Go over to Ardelia Brock's and tell her father wants her place?"

"Yes," said Mary, with dignity. She stepped out from his beguiling arm, took off her apron, laid it on the table and walked away, ignoring him. He followed her, and when she had seated herself by the window looking out into the old-fashioned garden, just come awake after the snow, placed himself obstinately in front of her.

"Don't you think it's a mean trick?" he inquired.

Mary did not answer. She drew her workbasket toward her, and began assiduously to put it in an order it did not need. This was to escape his persistent look. But while she evaded the look, she was proud of it, the directness of it, the indignant protest. "The young eagles" came into her mind, from her Bible. She thought both her boys were eagle-like in their fitness for the upper air, their strength and potential fierceness. Sometimes she had to escape them when they wanted to know too circumstantially about him: for they both called their father "him." She could not prevent it, though they had taken no stand over it and sometimes tried to please her with the more dutiful word.

"It's a mean shame," said Ben again. "That's all she's got, she and Ellie."

"The lot belonged to this place years ago," said his mother, ranging herself with her husband against her own conviction. "It's natural for your father to want it back."

"I don't call it natural," said Ben. He was frowning. His chestnut brows lost their wistful look and became grave. "I call it mean. No matter how they came by it, it's theirs."

"Your father'd buy it," said Mary. "He'd pay them a good price."

"Well," said Ben, "they wouldn't have a roof over their heads."

It was an old-fashioned way to put it, and Mary asked involuntarily:

"Where'd you get that? Who'd you hear say they wouldn't have a roof over their heads?"

"She said it herself,— Mrs. Brock."

"You haven't been thorning her about it?"

"No, 'course not. But last night she said it to Ellen, just as I was going in. Ellie was crying, and her mother said, 'Anyway we've got a roof over our heads.'"

"Why!" said Mary. She flushed slightly with the interest of it. "D'you go over there last night?"

"Yes," said Ben. He was looking absently out of the window now, at the waving green.

"Before I went?"

"No, after."

"I don't know as I should have let you, if I'd known it," said Mary gravely, "the day of the funeral so. I shouldn't have gone myself, if your father hadn't insisted on it."

"Oh, I went because it was the day of the funeral," said Ben, with a cheerful belief in himself. "I knew they'd be feeling bad, and I thought that was the time to go."

"Well!" said his mother. She put the spools back in her basket hastily. It seemed to her his mind had taken a safe sidetrack and the emergency was over. But Ben had returned to it by another route.

"We've got acres of land," said he, "acres and acres."

"Ben," said his mother, the more emphatically because she was speaking against her own convictions, "when you are older, you will understand how anybody might want to have a big place just as it was when the township was first settled, same as your father does."

"I shouldn't," said Ben, in unexpected aptness, "if I had to get it away from the fatherless and the widow."

He was not given to pious expression, and his mother was the less prepared.

"Now," she said blankly, "where'd you get that?"

"The minister said it at the funeral," returned Ben. "That ain't anything to say. It's only another way of putting it. That's what you can't get used to, mum. You know Ellie's father's dead, and you know Ardelia Brock's a widow. It's my saying it the way the minister did that knocks you. But what I want to know is, are you truly going to mind him and go over there and beg Mrs. Brock's land away from her?"

"Yes," said Mary, returning to the dignity that was often her marital defense. "I've told you once. But I'll tell you again, so you can put it out of your mind." She stopped short, her head up, listening, raising her hand also to enjoin his silence. Ben listened an instant, and turned to leave the room.

"Yes, that's Hugh," he called back to her, "up attic."

"Oh," said his mother, rising from her chair, alert and anxious, "he's practicing. You tell him —"

Still she listened, her head bent and her face all a frowning intentness. It only relaxed when the violin

broke off half-way in its climbing scale. Then, in a moment more, she heard the two boys clattering down the stairs, and began putting the room in order. She moved a chair an inch or two, straightened a rug, and was speciously busy when her sons came in. Even to Hugh she had never owned that it was less than politic for him to play when his father was in hearing. She only invented little pretexts for calling him away from his loved task, and while he was at it watched and listened as a mother animal does when the cub is in danger. The boys came in together, and she smiled at them. They knew the smile. It was the special brand she used when she was protecting their father from what they knew to be their just conclusions.

"Hugh," said she, "will you move that backlog a mite to the left? It's too heavy for me." Then, for the artifice seemed as foolish to her as it did to them, she amended her speech. "Anyways, it's heavier'n I often tackle."

But Hugh made no pretense of carrying out her subterfuge. He stood there gazing gravely at her, his mind still with his violin.

"I looked out of the window once or twice," he said. "I didn't think he'd got back."

"He's been back half an hour," said Ben.

He went to the fireplace and adjusted the backlog, moving it a little as his mother had prescribed. He did it to save her scruples, and he was the one to do it, she was aware, not because he respected her state of feeling more than his brother did, but because his mind was more open to it. Not only to-day, but all days, Hugh's mind was with his violin as with a love he could approach by stealth only. He was either wondering whether he could slip off to Larry Greene in the back road and take a lesson, or

get an hour's stolen practicing, or accomplish his growing purpose and run away to a place where you were taught to play the violin by somebody who had made a name through playing it. As he stood there in his dark dream, his brows, beautiful black arcs drawn together, Mary glanced at him and felt the ecstatic pang of that mother-love she had for them both, but chiefly, though she had never owned it to herself, for Hugh, because he was her first-born. She had for him a mingling of emotions borne like flowers on the rushing tide of her younger married life. He meant his father to her, his father when Mary had accepted his imperious sway with a passionate desire to give more even than he asked of her, to burn herself and her will on the altar of his just mastery. Hugh looked like him, too, dark, commanding, no trace near his firm mouth of the hated dimple, yet with something his father never had: a sweetness of radiant faith, a warm unbending to what he loved. He had been an enchanting baby to her, and in his approaching manhood he was still enchanting, the more poignantly because she knew how thwarted he was in his dear purposes. Ben always seemed abundantly able to pluck what he wanted off the tree of life; but there were reasons why she could never think of him with an untroubled mind. He belonged to the later time when she had begun to escape from her husband in the secret desires of her soul, when overflowing love for him had been merged in obedience, when, even with little Hugh in her arms, she longed for the free air of youth at play, and the more passionately because she knew, by the terms of her bond, it would be denied her. And this was the time when, seeing paths of pleasure — pathetic little paths that led only to ribbons or a dance in town — she had longed to escape and take her joy of

them. She looked about at other wives who managed cleverly and lied about it, and wondered if the lie was theirs or his who drove them to it, and then gravely kept her road. It was hard, seeing Mary Neale now in her majestic middle years, to suspect she had ever been tempted by trivial things; but she had known unseasoned youth, with all youth's longings. And at that time of indignant servitude Ben had come, as she afterward thought, along the path of her desire for pleasure. Sometimes when she was in church and heard the minister talk about the soul, she was warmly moved, and sat there blushing with the glory of it: to think she knew Hugh's soul, with its reaching desires, its shy fancies and aching loyalties. And then she would grow cold, and stop thinking about souls. For there was her other son: she had given him a beautiful body — but what more?

Hugh was recalling her.

"Mother," said he, "do you s'pose the Brocks have got any money?"

His face had cleared of its dreamy absorption, and showed an intentness of interest in the thing he had to say. The question irritated her. It seemed to her she had got to encounter them all, her husband, her sons and later Ardelia Brock herself, on the topic of Ardelia's fortunes.

"For mercy sake!" she said, "what do you want to know that for?"

"I shouldn't think they would have anything," said Hugh, ignoring her warmth. "Larry Greene was all broke up last night because she asked to get trusted for the coffin."

"How's Larry Greene know?" said his mother impatiently.

"He heard it over to Elkins'. The men sit around there

and talk. Maybe she's borrowed of Larry now. Maybe he made her. I don't know."

"Sometimes I think you'd better not go over to Larry Greene's so much," said Mary helplessly. "Your father don't consider him a very good character, and Elkins' 's nothing more nor less than a saloon.

And immediately she was ashamed of herself, knowing she considered Larry a man of character and manners.

"'Course it's a saloon," said Hugh. "Everybody knows that. Mother, when you going over to the Brocks' ?"

"I went last night," said Mary, returning to the convenient dignity she donned when they questioned her too curiously.

"She's going to-night," said Ben. He had been looking from one to the other, with the alertness of a clever fellow who is determined to possess himself of the situation. "She's going over to ask Ardelia Brock —"

His mother turned upon him. There was that in her air they knew and were accustomed to heed. Mary Neale, when she did put her foot down, had to be obeyed.

"That will do, Ben," she said. "Not another word."

The willfulness faded out of his face. He began to kick at the birch wood by the hearth.

"Let the wood alone," said Mary, thankful to reprove him for something tangible. "Now I must get supper. Hannah won't be back to-night. You pick me up some kindling."

Ben went silently off through the kitchen.

He pursed his lips to whistle, but thought better of it, especially as his father's step was emphatic in the shed. Hugh, too, heard the step, and so did Mary. What happened thereupon was precisely what always happened. Hugh went out the front way, so swiftly you might have

thought he disappeared by miracle. She was used to these expert flights when the boys heard their father coming, and thought she had only postponed reasoning them out of an act so palpably lacking in respect; but she did know there was unhappy cause for it, and to-day it hurt her more than ever.

II

At supper that night, no one talked. Neale did not wittingly snuff out the spark of sociability, but his mind was unbrokenly on affairs; for him, conversation as an art or a means of pleasure, did not exist. When he saw the boys laughing together, it seemed an ebullition incident to their youth; but if his wife joined them, he glanced at her briefly in a surprise he was not interested enough to satisfy. Nearly all the things he seemed to condemn he hardly saw at all. They were outside his vision.

Sitting there at the table, Mary let her mind stray off to Ardelia Brock and her daughter, Ellen. Perhaps she was sorrier for the little daughter than for Ardelia even. She knew, in a fragmentary way, what Ellen's father had been to her. All the neighbors knew. They had said, from Ellen's birth, that Ardelia was a good enough mother, but that David took more care of the child than she did. David, who was now dead, had been a silent, ruminative man of no ambitions, but a deep wonder over the earth and its miracles and an absorbing love for his daughter. He seemed quite contented with days' works for "old Mendell" who raised vegetables and fruit for market, with mending locks and tinkering here and there. A man of a quick mind toward wood and metal he was eager to serve them when they were sick and needed him but had no ghost of an impulse toward making what would bring him in larger moneys. He was quite willing, it seemed, to have his wife swell the living account by helping out Larry Greene's small housekeeping, and he and Larry spent

hours when, the neighbors said, they should have been at work, in talking, eyes fixed on vacancy, about, the neighbors again said, "nothing." But the things they turned over and over in those unproductive hours were what mankind must always muse upon so long as the earth spreads her lure of wonder. David and Ellen were hedged about in a solitude of their own. It was, though not of their will or knowledge, a solitude closed against Ardelia. And she, not even guessing she was outside, was content with her own household tract. Ellen loved her mother as she loved the cat and the fireplace and her bread and milk; but David had loved her once with all the ardor of his imaginative springtime. To the last, he did not question her, even in his mind; but all the sensitive filaments of it recoiled from her. And, quite unconsciously, he tried to make of Ellen the child of his own desires and though inevitably within the range of her mother's silliness unharmed by it. He told her grave stories of little girls who were certain to do delightful things: chiefly to see the Alps and Westminster Abbey. But strangely these little girls never seemed to grow up or marry. David, confronted from time to time by the undying youth of Ardelia's old coquetry, could not bear to think of Ellen bridling and holding her head enchantingly, if it meant so little — only something to hurt a man with in the end, like a golden apple tarnished. He was afraid of knowledge for his child, the false knowledge of what is called love, and would not even let her go to district school, but taught her himself, with the help of Larry Greene, so that she knew so little of the world, as children have found it in their explorations, that she was like a little alien among them, when they did briefly play together, and they hooted her. Poor little pioneers who can't trust the elders entirely! they have to go out ex-

ploring in squads. But Ellen went alone, timorously, and when she found the woods too thick called loudly on her father or Larry, and they were always there. For a year now she had been one of the dozen free out-of-town pupils at the Academy, absorbed in a rapture of the enchantingly new; but to her father this was a wrench from dear habit, a doubt and a ceaseless apprehension. It weakened him physically; he would have liked to spend the years of his life with a little Ellen, picking thimbleberries for her and threading them on a grass spire, telling murmured stories in the dark before the fire, and counseling her vaguely to "be a good girl."

Suddenly, Mary was aware, through her musing over Ellen, that Neale was speaking to her. He had risen from the table — this he always did before his wife — and now he stood looking down at her and frowning a little because she did not attend directly.

"You better go over there right away."

The boys glanced at her in a quick interrogation. Ben, not used to waiting for the satisfaction of his curiosities, asked eagerly, before his father was outside the door:

"You going, mother?"

Mary had not known whether she was going or not. She had felt, as her husband spoke, that a grave decision was before her. But now she answered at once, and with dignity:

"Yes, I'm going right over."

Ben looked disappointed; he had hoped for the excitement of rebellion. But Hugh, like his mother, was thoughtful, and when she rose from the table, stood by it waiting until Ben had remembered some quest of his own and loped off out of doors.

"Mother," said Hugh, "you wait a minute."

She was going rapidly back and forth, with a house-

wife's precision of act, piling dishes and carrying away the food. Hugh had something difficult to present. It made him frown, and the color ran into his face. Mary knew something important was coming, and with a kindly wariness she ceased even her inward interrogation, to let him get hold of himself.

"I guess your aunt don't mean to come down to supper," she volunteered. "I'll leave out the biscuits. 'Twon't hurt 'em to dry off a little. I didn't think they were extra good,— not so good as Hannah's."

Hugh plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out a wad of money.

"Mother," said he, "here's six dollars. I want you to give it to her."

"Who?" Mary stopped in her progress to-and-fro.

"It's for Mrs. Brock."

"Where'd you get this?" asked his mother, keeping an even tone. Yet her eyes brightened, and a warmer red ran into her cheeks. She had a glowing sense of the beauty of her son's compassion.

"Aunt Tab gave it to me, a little at a time."

"But, Hugh, you were saving it." A mother's regret that he was to lack the pleasure of his little hoard in no way tempered her pride in him. It made it more.

"What's the use anyway?" said Hugh. "Aunt Tab gives it to me to go away with; but it never'll be enough to go on, or to pay for lessons if I went. Sometimes one lesson's five dollars, sometimes more. It's no use. So you give it to Mrs. Brock."

Mary shook her head.

"No, Hugh," said she. "You keep your money. About Ardelia — well, I'll do what I can."

"When folks say that," returned the boy unhappily, "they never do anything."

He stuffed the money into his pocket again, and went off with a striding step, too much, Mary heavily felt, like his father's when circumstance had briefly withstood him. She stayed looking at the place where he had been, her mind a tumult of remonstrance against the nature of man and its ingratitude. She was standing by Hugh, against his will, and he was throwing off her compassion with a hopeless word. The tears rushed to her eyes, surprising her. She was not used to their traitorous overflow. She wiped them away, threw a shawl over her shoulders and, leaving the dishes for Hannah, went out of the kitchen and down the path into the road, to do her errand at the little house. It seemed rather foolish to go into the road and along to Ardelia's when she might have taken a short cut through the orchard, from back door to door. But no Neale with the desire of reclaiming the Brock place had ever approved of a path across lots. It would have threatened to establish some unwelcome intimacy. How could you cherish designs against a house you approached familiarly?

It was a small house, with two rooms in front and an entry between them. It was set low, entered by one step, and that pleasing humility gave it an attractive coziness. There were vines, jessamine and a honeysuckle, over the trellis at the door, and the very poverty of the place had made for a special beauty. Brock had left his clapboards unpainted and they had worn gray. Mary did not tap at the door. She opened it, in neighborly fashion, and found Ardelia in the kitchen, down a step in the ell, sitting by a side window with her hands folded in her lap, while Ellen, the daughter of sixteen, sat at the supper table eating bread and milk. Ardelia looked up when her neighbor came in. She did not speak, and Mary, used to that acceptance of good-will, threw off her shawl

and took the chair Ellen at once drew forward for her. There was greeting in Ellen's haste, a warm desire to show her gratitude to one who came to mother while mother was so sad. There was no likeness between mother and daughter. Ellen was brown, red under the warmth of her cheeks, and with an extraordinary look of sincerity in the eyes. Some trick of the lids made them seem to be asking pathetic questions, assuring you of the desire behind them to meet you with the clearest answer, if she only knew. Her thick hair grew abundantly in a lovely line about her forehead, and gave her, for she was still in short dresses, an antiquated make of childish clothes worn threadbare, a curiously grown-up look, for she had wound it in its thick braid on the top of her head.

"Why, Ellen," said Mrs. Neale, in involuntary comment, "you've done up your hair."

Ellen put a hand quickly to the crown of braids, flushed and said nothing.

"I dunno what possessed her," said her mother, in a vacuous tone. "She done it up this mornin'."

Ellen herself could not have explained. She did know that when she got up that morning it was to a world entirely different from any world she could even fancy. Though her father had been dead four days, yet until yesterday, when he was carried out of the house, it had not seemed so irreparable a loss. While his poor body, mysteriously left among them for cruel, pathetic observances, was still there, it had seemed possible that the animating spirit also lingered. It might even, by miracle — and she had been told there were miracles — enter again into its deserted home. But now he was gone utterly, and, perhaps with an unformulated sense of her own new responsibilities in his absence, she had made herself a woman.

"She looks just like him, don't she?" Ardelia contin-

ued, in the flat voice of one who marvels to no purpose and yet must voice her wonder. "Her hair's the color of his, an' so's her skin."

Ellen, as if the discussion now ceased to concern her, sat down again at the table and went on with her bread and milk.

"Yes," said Mrs. Neale, "Ellen's the picture of him."

She was looking compassionately at the wreck of the woman before her. Ardelia had been a blonde beauty in her youth. Mary remembered her so: too beautiful to need cultivate the graces or the virtue of soft ways. All eyes turned to follow her in her slim perfection of morning color. She had had a wonderful way of carrying her head and looking, as one of her lovers said, "slant-ways." It was, in her youth, unconscious. Ardelia had been born out of some fortunate mood of the moment, some heavenly concourse of the stars. And now, the radiant uplift of the head quite gone, all her color wiped and drained away from her by circumstance, she sat in a chocolate-colored wrapper and peered dimly and with distrust at fate.

"Delia," said Mary, "you had your supper?"

"I've had a cup o' tea," said Ardelia. "That'll keep me up. I don't feel to eat."

"Well," said Mary, "you've got to eat to live. We've all got to."

Ellen looked round in a quick, grateful assent. Mrs. Neale had confirmed her own inner belief which, added to a healthy appetite, had made her finish the bread and milk. But Ellen felt in her throat the choking misery of grief. She knew it would be easier really, not to eat, but to lie down and give way, perhaps cry and cry.

"I feel queer," said Ardelia. "I've felt queer ever since the services. This mornin' I didn't know where the

roller towel was, an' when Ellen told me, it looked strange."

Here Ellen rose and, to her own despairing wonder, began to cry aloud, and Mary Neale got up and went to her.

"There! there!" she said. She put her hands on the girl's shoulders and seemed to hold her steady. Perhaps she would have drawn her to her warm breast, but Ellen stood like a young tree shaken, yet not to be uprooted, and cried into her hands spread desperately before her face. "You cry, Ellen," said Mary Neale, in her soft, kind voice, "Don't you try to keep it down. It'll do you good."

"She ain't shed a tear," said Ardelia, in a pallid recognition of fact. "I dunno why she should cry about the roller towel."

Mary knew. It had frightened Ellen to see her mother so different. It had almost frightened Mary to come in and find her so.

"There," she said, taking her palms from Ellen's shoulders, with a last caressing pressure, "we needn't go back to the towel."

"'Twas the queerest thing that ever happened to me," said Ardelia, looking down at her hands in her lap, and seeming to be mildly interested in their movements, one over the other. "I come into the kitchen, an' Ellen was here buildin' the fire. I guess she got up 'fore day. Thinks I, 'I'll put up a clean roller towel.' An' then I says to myself, 'Where *is* the roller?' an' I looked round the kitchen an' couldn't see anything that looked like it, an' I says to Ellen, 'Where's the roller?' I says, an' she says, 'There 'tis, same's it always is, behind the door.' An' she had to lead me up to it, an' then it didn't look right."

Ellen, her tears staunched, was gazing at Mrs. Neale in an apprehensive challenging, as if she needed now to be told the worst. Mary gave her a smile and a reassuring nod.

"You're worn out, Ardelia," she said. "That's all. It's enough, too. Didn't you know when anybody's in grief, their bodies get all worn out, and everything looks strange to 'em? I guess the whole world looks strange. Now you get to bed early — I won't stay long — and to-morrow morning maybe things'll look different."

Ellen, clearing away, drew a long sobbing breath. She was grateful to Mary Neale for telling her other people had suffered just this mystery of grief. The world was every minute more of an unfamiliar place to her.

"Don't you go," said Ardelia. "I sha'n't get off to bed very early. It seems real good to have anybody come an' set a spell."

Mary held her hands clasped tightly on her knee. She found she was drawing her breath with difficulty. There was a task before her.

"Ardelia," said she, "I might as well say it now as any time. I've got something to ask you."

"What is it?" returned Ardelia, from her state of numb acquiescence.

Mary's hands gripped her knees the tighter. She opened her lips to speak, and what her tongue really said was so foreign to the words she had intended that she could have laughed with the grim humor of it.

"I'm going to cut a ham to-morrow. I'll send you over two-three slices." And she had meant to ask: "Will you sell your house and lot?"

Ardelia hardly woke from her numbness, but a slight warmth did appear in her voice.

"Your hams are real good," she said. "I guess Ellen'd like a bite anyways."

"Well," said Mary Neale, "I'll send one o' the boys over. I guess I'll be going now."

She rose and put her shawl about her shoulders; but at that moment the door opened in a desperate, bursting way, and Ben, red in the face and mysteriously amused, came tumbling in. He went straight up to his mother, seized the hand that had not left the shawl and pressed into it something soft and tightly folded.

"Here, mother," he said. "You didn't take it with you. It's the money you were going to give Mrs. Brock."

Then he fixed her with his eyes, mischief incarnate and also innocence, and Mary helplessly looked at him. She knew she was trapped. Somehow, mysteriously, he was making her give Ardelia Brock Hugh's little money. Ellen, standing near, glanced at her in a startled displeasure. She had every reason to doubt what Ben might do, or at least to reserve judgment until she had thought it over. But Ardelia, electrified by the mere hint of money, rose in her chair and glanced sharply from Mary to the boy. Mary, with a beautiful precision of judgment in the emergency, was making the best of it. She smoothed out the soft mishandled bills upon her palm and placed them accurately together. Then she spoke, in her clear voice of pleasant meanings.

"Ardelia, it's some money — it's only a little — that I was asked to give you."

Ardelia held out her thin hand.

"I dunno what he'd say," she quavered. She looked tremulously at Ellen who was so like her father. "He never was one to take anything he hadn't earned."

"It's only a little," said Mary again. "Maybe it will do — something." She laid the bills, carefully folded

now into neat compass, in the eager hand. "Don't say anything," she said. She had often cautioned Ardelia thus, without explaining further, if she had given her a pat of butter or vegetables from the field, and Ardelia understood, without surprise, that it was Neale who was not to know. "Good-night. Come, Ben."

But Ellen stepped forward in a haste that looked almost angry, her tear-washed eyes on Mary Neale.

"Mother'll pay you back," she said. "I'm going to pick peas for old Mendell. Then we can pay you."

"There, there, Ellen!" said her mother, with a pitiful little smile at Mary.

The smile meant they both understood. This was only a child and must be humored. But Mary Neale was looking at Ellen, with a mother look of pity and encouragement.

"Don't you worry, Ellen," she said. "It's only a little mite. Now, Ben."

Ben, as he passed Ellen, gave a swift motion of the hands up and over his head, indicating that he had done up his hair and was overcome by the wonder and glory of it, and then followed his mother. But she had gone faster than he and, when he overtook her, was outside the gate. She had waited to have it out with him.

"That was Hugh's money," she said to him severely, in accusation he pursed his lips to whistle at. Things often seemed to him of less importance than people made of them. But he decided to postpone the whistling. Not much could be done with mother in certain moods of hers, brought on usually by family transgression. "You played a trick on me," she continued, with a swelling indignation. "I shall punish you."

"It was Hugh's own money," said he cheerfully. "He'd a right to give it away, if he wanted to."

"Did he tell you I wouldn't take it?"

"No."

"How'd you know, then?"

"I heard him ask you. I was listening."

"Oh! then how'd the money come into your hands at all?"

"I told Hugh I could get it to 'em. Oh, what's the use, mum? It's only six dollars anyway. It ain't worth such a fuss."

Mary started slowly on and he went beside her. Anger had cooled in her as it always did over her children's small transgressions. After all, she, too, was glad Ardelia had the money, only she wanted to see, at the same time, a way of making it up to Hugh. But Ben, dismissing the whole affair in a haste he had, was slipping his hand under her soft arm and beguiling her.

"Mum," he said, "did you ask her?"

"Ask her what?" But she knew, and her guilty soul was debating how she could meet her husband and confess his errand was not done.

"You know. Ask Mrs. Brock to sell."

Mary pressed the arm so close to her that it hurt her softer breast.

"No," she said violently, "I didn't."

"Thunder!" said Ben. "I guess you'll wish you had." Mary knew that, but she could not lay aside dignity of bearing toward her husband to acknowledge that to his son. "Aren't you ever going to ask her?" he was persisting. She did not answer. "Mum, truly, didn't you say one word?"

Urged thus far, it was a relief to speak.

"No," said she. "I couldn't ask her. How could I? Her husband dead and Ellie—" Her voice failed her there, and Ben's pressure on the soft arm told her he un-

derstood and she needn't say it. And then they were at their own gate, and he slipped behind and went up the path in her wake. He wanted to know where father was, before deciding to go in. If father was there, he would be sure to send them all to bed untimely, under prophecy of "a hard day to-morrow." But if he had gone to bed himself in preparation for his own hard day, Ben and his brother could sit on the shed steps, well out of range, and talk in murmurs of the swimmin' hole and also the future which had begun to loom large before them. Father's voice came short and deep from the dimly lighted room, and Mary, too, stopped to listen. She noted that her husband had only a candle, and it tired her at the outset, like all those reiterated obstinacies that make family life intolerable. She liked a lamp, chiefly because it was more cheerful for the boys. She knew they hated the candle-lighted dusk. But Thomas's father had used candles, and his mother had dipped them, and he was of opinion that they saved appreciably.

"There's no reason about it," he was saying. "I say so, that's all. An' I know, an' you don't."

Mary guessed what he was talking about, he and Hugh. The boy had brought forth his long-cherished wish, the wish he was desperately afraid to put, lest the mere utterance should be its death, to go away and study the violin. His own voice now came out through the darkness, so stifled by emotion that the mother's heart stood still in its fury of compassion and then bounded as if it would break its walls for her darling's defense.

"It'll be too late," Hugh was urging, in that choked, lifeless voice. "I don't know but it's too late now."

"I'm givin' you both your full time at the 'Cademy," said his father. Ben accomplished a noiseless little leap on the grass. He had not been sure father meant them

to finish the course. "Not many men'd do as much. In my time, boys worked an' paid their way. If there's anything in you, you'll be a minister, an' Ben'll be a lawyer."

Ben, through the darkness, made a face at the maiden moon and swung his arms fantastically. What should he, the wordless comment said, do in a world of moons and hylas and sweet spring scents with a lawyer's quibblings for ultimate end?

"But," Thomas went on, "beyond your majority, I can't control you. You'll do as you may. Till that time, I can. What do you think you'd do, a grown-up man, with a fiddle? go round playin' for dances, or live alone like Larry Greene, drinkin' all day an' fiddlin' all night?"

Mary Neale held her breath to hear the answer. But Hugh said nothing. Perhaps Ben, better than she, knew what he was thinking. The urge of youth was in them both, and though neither had words to set it forth, they knew there was a world where the fiddle spoke so clearly that it uttered all the sweet madnesses of life and so, having said them, made the heart light of them forever. Ben, understanding Hugh as Hugh understood the fiddle, knew what a headlong passion this was of his and how horribly dangerous it was to thwart him in it. But being light of heart, he believed there were byways out of defeat, and so it seemed to him that Hugh would get his wish.

"Come," his mother said to him, in a low tone charged with the passion risen in her from her listening. "Come in." She judged they had talked enough, and she wanted Ben to enter with her and somehow help her bear the sight of Hugh's defeated eyes.

"That you?" called her husband, when her feet were barely over the sill. "Well, what d' she say?"

Mary went on into the room, Ben lightly behind her.

In his father's presence he always walked as if he trod on gossamer.

"She's all worn out," said Mary, taking off her shawl and folding it into suitable length to hang over the back of a chair. "This morning she didn't know where the roller towel was."

"Didn't know what?"

His voice told her she had befogged him and how in his perplexity he was staring at her through the dusk, and she hastened to amend her speech.

"She's tired out. I told her to go to bed and get a good night's rest."

"Well," said her husband, "d'you ask her?"

Ben was standing near her, hardly seeming to breathe, he was so still. Hugh was there in the corner, his wounded look mercifully hidden from her by the dark. The thought of them as they were and as their young blood urged them to be, assailed her mother-heart like an army swarming into a citadel and killed, in the rush, all her clarity of purpose.

"Yes," she said calmly, "I asked her." Now she heard the little catch in Ben's breath. It wouldn't mean blame of her, she knew. It might even be admiration.

"What'd she say?"

"She said 'no.'"

"She wouldn't do it?"

"No."

"Wouldn't sell?" It seemed as if the insistent voice would never leave pursuing her to the limit of her duplicity. "D'you make her understand 'twould be for her good in the end?"

Mary thought they had approached the point where she might be allowed a little discursiveness, so that the guilt of her treachery might not burn her so hotly.

"Thomas," she said, "it isn't for her good to sell. How could anybody make her see it's for her good to sell her home?"

"D'you make her understand I stood ready to pay her all 'twas wuth, an' more?"

"Yes."

He was silent a moment, and she felt herself, inwardly, and in a different sort of silence, fighting off the question that was coming.

"Well," he said, rising to his feet. "Then I've got to get at it some other way round. Come, le's go to bed. We're goin' to have a hard day to-morrer."

He went off through the dark, carrying his shoes in his hand and shuffling in his stocking feet.

"Don't you want the candle?" his wife called after him.

But he did not answer, and in a moment she heard him on the stairs. Then, so swiftly that she seemed to run, though noiselessly, from place to place, she went to the table and lighted the great lamp there, and, without a look at her sons, hurried into the kitchen and lighted one there also. She had the desire that was so often with her to make smiling cheer for them out of the gloom their father was thrusting upon them from his uncomprehending heart. When she came back, the two boys were standing near the table, as if they wanted to be within the circle of light. She did not glance at Hugh. Still she was afraid of the wounded look in his eyes. Ben made a dart at her and hugged her to him, awkwardly and with rapture.

"O mum," he said, "what a whopper! Weren't you grand?"

Then Mary knew her moral supremacy was lost indeed. She had lied outright to her husband — the first time,

truly the first time — and her sons knew she had lied. Ben knew it because she had told him she had not asked Ardelia to sell, and in the time of her delay in the kitchen Ben had told Hugh. She stood all the straighter in the poor defense of her outer dignity, ignoring Ben and trying, from her mother passion, to give them both something that should send them to bed light-hearted. But she had nothing to give them but the lamp.

"I guess I'll go now," she said. "You can sit up as long as you want to, if you'll come up quiet. Why don't you get out the checker-board?"

There was a rustling through the kitchen, and then a clink of dishes.

"There's Aunt Tab," she said, in relief at hearing another being astir to make a pretense at family life. "You both go and see 't she has something to eat. You open the cake jar. I made some cookies. You've lost a button, Hugh. You bring it to me in the morning, dear."

That was all she allowed herself. Even the endearment was perhaps the word too much. Hugh could not endure cosseting. But it soothed the mother heart in her.

III

Aunt Tab was in the pantry, picking at a plate of cold greens left from dinner. Though she was thin and really frail looking, she had a hearty appetite for country fare, and Hannah often found fragments left to be warmed over well depleted by her ravaging. But Hannah never complained. Everybody in the house except its master recognized Aunt Tab's position as a lawless alien, and made it as easy for her as they might. It was, so far as hostile report went, as if she had eaten fern seed and walked invisible. Mary often wondered what Thomas thought when his sister did not appear at the table for days at a time. Aunt Tab herself never wondered. She spent as few minutes as possible in thinking about Brother Thomas. Perhaps she classed him among the embarrassing spirits we are afraid of invoking by thought or name. When the boys, really not hungry but taking mother's suggestion of the pantry for lack of something else, to prolong the sweet spring evening, came upon her, delicately picking, she looked up at them with a gleam of welcome in her bright blue eyes. She was of spirit-like thinness, with sanguine complexion, the skin drawn tight over the bones, and the red hair streaked with gray sometimes bound in a tight knot on the top of her head and sometimes curled and flying, and she wore a loose wrapper — very beautiful indeed, of a soft ancient stuff, bright with palm leaves. She did not especially fancy the palm leaves, and thought a plain color far more suitable t

her years. But the palm leaves had been waiting a long time in a chest under the eaves, indeed since the year when a Captain Neale made a voyage to the land of palms; and even now, after gentle wear in her chamber, they seemed indestructible.

"You boys want some greens?" she inquired, her fork poised as if she couldn't go on eating unless she knew whether the stock would go round.

"No," said Ben, "we're trailin' cookies. Where'd mother say?"

Aunt Tab, with a crafty care, lifted the cover of the jar, and Ben plunged in a hand. As it came out with a clutch of cookies he glanced round at Hugh, who was standing in the doorway looking past Aunt Tab out of the window where the spring night hung like a curtain. But he was aware of Ben's inquiring gaze and twitched a shoulder impatiently, a habit he had, as if he threw off hindering thoughts.

"No," he said, "I don't want any."

Aunt Tab, returned to her greens, looked steadily at him as she ate. At length, just as she cleared the dish, the meaning of the boy's look was revealed to her, and she gasped, in a breath of terrified admiration:

"You ain't asked him?"

Hugh nodded.

"Asked father?" Ben put it, his mouth full of cookies and the crumbles thick on his coat. "I heard him. D'you ask him to send you away to fiddle?"

"Yes," said Hugh. There was not so much bitterness in his voice as a scorn of himself that he could have been a fool. "I asked him to lend me the money. I told him I promised mother not to go unless he said I might."

"Well," said Tabitha thoughtfully, "I guess it's easy enough to tell what he'd say."

"He said 'no'," returned Hugh violently. "I might go to the devil for all he'd care."

"No, no," said Tabitha, startled. The devil was technically as dangerous as the mention of her brother. "Don't you speak so." But she plucked up hope for the sake of Hugh, who was her best-beloved. "Don't you worry," she said, adding, with a cheerful indirectness, "you should have all I've got, if I had anything."

The boys thought they knew she hadn't anything except stupid rights of living here and eating in the pantry, and a few acres of woodland. Ben had brought himself a large tumbler and filled it with milk from the top of a pan, and this he drank luxuriously, tilting the glass on his nose. Then he brushed the crumbs from his front and turned to Hugh.

"Come," he said hopefully, "le's go down to Larry's."

Hugh nodded, but Aunt Tab plucked up a timorous argument.

"I don't know's I should hang round that Larry Greene's," she said, "if I's you boys. Your father never'd approve of it — never in the world. I don't know what he'd do to you."

Hugh gave a short laugh.

"He told me what he'd do. The time I went down to practice for the dance, he told me if I did it again he'd break every bone in my body."

"There!" said Aunt Tab, as if this made it conclusive.

But Ben put a hand on his brother's shoulder and swung him round.

"Come on," he said, "let's go and get our bones broke."

They were as cautious in crossing the kitchen and stealing out through the shed, as if they had been pirates entering a port under cover of the dark; that was what it

pleased them to think they were. But once in the lot at the back of the house, they broke into a run and kept neck and neck until they had reached the back road where Larry lived. Aunt Tab stole through the kitchen after them, to fasten the door. She knew there was the way of climbing up the trellis to the shed chamber when they should return, and she was always more at ease when the house was snugly fastened. Then she went up the back stairs and shut herself softly in her room. When Aunt Tab was in her own room she changed into a rather happy person, far happier than she had ever expected to be in the old days when she had not known how things were going to turn out. Now they had really turned out, some people might have said, as badly as possible, her bread fed to her from the hand of Brother Thomas; but at least she knew that was the way it would be for her entire life. She lighted her small lamp and set the green shade over it, humming as she did so. Did this gentle drone harmonize her life with the puzzling course of things about her? Sometimes perhaps it did. Only when Thomas was in the house she had the sense to sing under her breath. She considered what she should do for the half-hour before going to bed. Her occupations were intensely absorbing to her. She had on her shelves by the chimney-piece a great assortment of old books, which she meant to read when she had time. But so far she had read only "Uncle Tom's Cabin," in a dark cloth edition, and when she had finished it she went back and read it again. Eliza's crossing the ice never lost its thrill. She never ceased to weep over little Eva's death, and St. Clair was her ideal of irresistible charm. In a chest under one of the windows she had piles of old fashion magazines; but these she never read except in moments of entire abandon to the bright, luxurious side of life. And sometimes after

an evening of girls who danced at Saratoga and came back to dance in old New York, she would dream dreams of a sort to bring the blood to her cheeks when she recalled them by day, only to dismiss them again. Even the dreams were not for her. They were always of lovers and often of parting and pain and the joy that comes of meeting. To-night, after considering the avenues her pleasures might take, she settled down to nothing, and found herself led into a waking muse about Hugh and what she would give him if she had anything to give.

Ben and Hugh had, not without adventure, traversed the wood and come out at Larry's house. They had scared up a large black oblong that proved to be a hedgehog and brought a real thrill to Ben, who persuaded himself it was a bear cub with the mother behind a tree. They had forgotten, in the haste of their going, the dull debates that had begun the evening, and talked along finely, disputing, agreeing, but after all not paying much attention to each other, each running on in his own boy way.

Larry Greene was said to be the best educated man in the township, not excepting the minister, and it was always added that, if it hadn't been for his "habit," he might have gone to the Legislature, or made money "same as his brother" had. The Greenes had once been the great family in the township. They had driven good horses and drunk fiery liquor. Larry, the younger brother of the present squire, was the very image, it was said, of another Lawrence in the past, the maddest one of all, about whom legends of luxury and madcap pranks had clung. The present Larry was still a young man when, at the death of his father, he left the mansion where his forebears had lived and came down to this lit-

tle house on the back road. He brought with him his fiddle and his dog. The dog had died, at a good old age, and then Larry had had another; and now the third, Smilie, a wandering hound, had taken up uninvited residence with him. Ardelia Brock came across the woods — a little walk — once or twice a day, as he needed her, to get his food and keep his house in order; and now Ellen, well grown enough to do tasks deftly, would sometimes come in her mother's place. Nobody knew where Larry got the little money it took him to live on, in his fantastically neat, plain way; the neighbors judged it could not be from the foolish things he wrote. These were sketches of country life, grim, biting, and, to his neighbors, valueless because they were no more than what the eye saw and the ear heard every day. They did not know that a few clear-seeing minds adored the sketches because they were so true, and that his patient, gay refusal to color them with a shade of the rose of optimism kept down his income to its meager limits. At the same time, indeed for the last ten years, he had been working on a history of Bromley, and that and his fiddle, when he had ten dollars to the good, kept him light-hearted. Larry was of those, who, having missed all the prizes, manage the genial leisure to look about them and take cognizance of the face of earth. But always the common mind, when he was mentioned, swung round to his habit. Sometimes, for days at a time, often, indeed, at an interval of months, he shut himself up in his house for a bout of the drinking that is so doubly damned when a man drinks alone. At those times, he would turn his dog out of the house, and put out a little flag, always, significantly, at half-mast, from his front window sill. The flag meant that Ardelia was not to come in. Nobody could enter, indeed, because

he locked his doors; but Ellen especially was forbidden to come up the path to the house when she saw the banner of his defeat.

"I heard you," he said to the boys to-night, as they opened the door upon him where he sat by his kitchen stove. "What a devil of a racket you two make coming through the woods. I thought it was an Indian massacre."

The boys grinned at him in silent greeting, and took their accustomed seats. Larry, set off by the colors of his calico-cushioned armchair, was a distinguished figure in his blue shirt and trousers. The boys had known him from their farthest remembrance, and to them he was only Larry, different from the rest of the neighbors in some undefined way, but not to be wondered at. They did not see that his fine head, the beautiful line of his profile — all pride and sweetness — the dark eyes with their look of mystery and his parchment skin, were the stuff memory snatches out of old portraits. Life doesn't usually compose such pictures in flesh and blood. He turned upon Hugh with the question Ben and Aunt Tab had put:

"Have you asked your father?"

Hugh nodded. He looked jaded, tired of the whole business.

"So he said 'no'?"

Again Hugh nodded.

"Well," said Larry, "that's what you expected, wasn't it?"

Hugh said nothing. He looked toward the case where Larry's fiddle lay and Larry took up a cushion from the floor and tucked it behind his head.

"You play to-night," he said. "Get her out."

Hugh stared at him, at once incredulously happy, mouth open in the beginning of an exclamation, and the

color ran into his face. Larry's fiddle was sacred to the fiddler's own hand. Was he offering it now in some fine understanding of the boy's discomfiture, to lure him into those regions where even a father's 'no' cannot check the rivers of life? Hugh got diffidently up and took out the violin. He put it awkwardly to his chin, awkwardly because it was so precious to him and the honor inconceivably great, and began tuning it. Larry laid his head back on the cushion and seemed to sleep, or drowse expectant. Ben went over to the corner whence, from a wild assemblage of burlap bags, had come a whimpering of puppies pending mother's arrival with the milk. The mother, Smilie, a lean black hound with tan markings, had been turned out an hour ago because Larry judged it was best not to have the puppies pulling at her, and now sat on her tail in the shed, trembling, and at intervals putting her nose to the crack of the door to exhale a long passionate breath. Ben critically selected the puppy best adapted, in his eyes, to cuddling and took it back with him under his chin. He curled up on the old worn sofa by the window and absorbedly "loved" it. Hugh had begun to play. Larry, having taught him, knew all he could do; but Hugh, led on by the fatal ambition of proving himself worthy the loan of the sacred fiddle, tried to attain more than his best. He forsook the paths of remembered melody and began improvising as Larry improvised, when they two sat late by the fire. Larry's themes, as Hugh knew, were filched from Canadian songs and every classical treasury under heaven; sometimes they were wildly moving strains. But his own improvising, he madly resolved, should tell Larry at last just what he could do and how worthy he was of going out to make a name and how angry he was and how sorrowful, and at the same time how sure to be triumphant. He aban-

doned himself to his ecstasy, and Larry, eyes closed, leaned back and smoked and listened, and Ben loved the puppy. And when Hugh had put into the music all there was in him to put anywhere, Larry only stretched out a hand for the fiddle and tucked it under his own chin and began to play. And his playing was a rebuke: cool, clear, calm fragments, remembered songs. Hugh knew them all. And his heart sank lower and lower and almost he felt his eyes would fill with tears, there was so much against him. He knew Larry couldn't comfort him with those rebuking ditties. Nothing should comfort him but having his will of the world. But Larry did comfort him. The measured solace had its way, though not for an hour or more when the player, dark now about the eyes and paler, stopped suddenly and said:

"Here. Put it up."

Hugh sprang for the fiddle and laid it in its place. Larry was leaning back with a sigh. Was it of satisfaction, or of misery over the ills of youth?

"You don't believe I'm ever going to play," said Hugh. He was stung in his pride because the pouring out of his heart had been a formless overflow, destitute of just restraint. Larry never answered his questions directly when they touched the fiddle.

"Go home now," he said. "Bring your fiddle over next time and we'll do some things together."

Hugh got up, took the puppy away from Ben and returned it to its nest. He wanted to be gone before he showed the hurt that was quivering in him. Ben, giving up the puppy with a mild surprise and as sleepy as it, rose and stretched himself and yawned. Larry too got up and went to the back door to let in the hound. She came, with an ecstatic scutter, to her darlings in their untidy bed.

"To-morrow night, boy," said Larry. "Good-night. Cut along or you won't be home before twelve."

When they were in the path they took a swift according pace. But beyond the woods and in the lot near home, Ben stopped.

"I don't see," said he. "what in thunder you want to play a fiddle for."

Hugh could not himself tell why. But at the mere mention of it, all the world within him seemed to thrill with the beating of a million wings. When he had been playing a while he was conscious of peace and seraphic well-being. When he was kept from playing, forces within him rioted and seemed to overthrow even his physical poise. But he could not answer, and perhaps Ben, thinking now of bed, hardly cared. Ben had one thing more to say.

"I gave her the money,— mother, you know. Right before Ardelia. And mother had to pass it to her. And Ardelia took it."

"Was Ellie there?"

"Oh, yes. She's got her hair done up on top of her head. She thinks she's the whole show."

"Did she like it — about the money — about her mother's taking it?"

"No. She looked like a meat axe. She said she'd pay it back."

"Come along," said Hugh. "You go up first. Don't bust the trellis. We 'most did, last time."

IV

The next morning Neale shaved and dressed for his regular trip to town. Usually he carried eggs, perhaps early apples in their season,— any produce he had, to exchange for the week's supplies. These forenoons when he was sure to be away were breathless seasons for his household. Everybody had kept something illicit to be done when he should be gone, and everybody was doing it without regard to anybody else, so that an air of ill-regulated excitement hung about the place. Hugh, as usual at this moment of release, paid no attention to others. He watched his father out of the yard sitting straight and looking queer in a peculiar sort of hat he had inherited from his own father and persisted in wearing on formal occasions. There had been several hats extant when Neale's father died, and they seemed to be indestructible. To Hugh, they were curiously the symbol of his father's unlikeness to other mankind. When he and Ben began to go to the Academy, Neale often stopped for them, if he had business in town, and Hugh had, in the beginning, felt actual nausea at the sight of the hat and the vivid certainty of what the boys thought of it. They did not think anything at all. They were town boys and old Neale's hat had been long familiar to them. They had spent their mirth over it while Hugh was still at district school. But he watched them warily all through the first term, and was still of opinion that there must have been something the matter with their understanding, or they would have jeered.

To-day father's back looked more inexorably obstinate than ever and more muscular in carrying out that abstract quality. Hugh felt a sickness of irresolution, as he watched him driving out. He hardly saw how any one could run away from such a back. But he had business of his own. He took a glance about the place, to be sure Ben was not within seeing distance, and went running across the orchard to the little house. It was nothing to him now that father preferred they should go by the road. The terrible back was every minute further off. He was in luck, for Ellen had just finished hanging out the clothes, and dropped her extra pins in the basket, idly, one by one. She was standing there for a last minute before going in to keep her mother sad company; she stayed because the spring was sweet to her. There at her feet, by the side of the gray shed, ladies'-delights were already blooming. The iris had put up an inch at least of brave green sword-blade, and a bluebird was saying enchanting things. Ellen was inexplicably pathetic in her slenderness, her long-legged nimbleness. She looked as if she could run a race with Atalanta; but wherever she ran it would take her to austere tasks, not to any bright rewards. Hugh, jumping the stone wall and making for her straight, was conscious of an irritated feeling that he wished things were somehow settled between him and Ellen. Within the last half-year he had begun to think about the love of woman, and he was increasingly sure he loved Ellen. He wished Larry would tell him about love, but Larry never seemed to know there were women in the world. The boys began to tell him, but it gave him an unexpected feeling of nausea, and he hit out at them and swore roughly, strange oaths that amazed them and made him very popular, but such as he never used again. Ellen didn't seem to him beautiful as

girls ought to be, if you loved them. Yet she always appeared to be looking over her shoulder at him and bidding him come. She never did look over her shoulder. She was as cold as Dian; but still he felt her calling and he had to answer. He ran up to her now, giving himself no time to suffer his foolish fear of her.

"Come on down to the spring," he said, "and get some ivories."

"Ivories" were the young checkerberry shoots in their spring spiciness. Ellen looked at him, in her calm way, and she answered unexpectedly:

"I don't know but I will. Mother don't want me. She's going over father's clothes upstairs."

She turned with him, and they crossed the stone wall and walked in silence to the bars that led into the lane and the pasture. Hugh had never asked her to go even to gather ivories before, but that was not important to her. Really she was listening to the spring and not to him. All through the days of her father's illness and these last of the solemn waiting to bury him, she had been shut away from the light by her duties and her grief. And all the time the spring had been greatening and getting fuller of ineffable fragrance and warmth, and her heart was aching with the passionate beauty of it. The lane, bordered on each side by hardhack and wilding blackberry bushes, was oozy from the last rain. Ellen stepped delicately, from habit, but Hugh went blundering along, frowning, and full of the perplexity of what he had to say. Then they came out on the upland of the open pasture where the cows were feeding, and one after another lifted an incurious glance to see them pass. The pinewoods were beyond and the bank blue with violets where they had always come first to gather them, fat crowded bunches, dropping stray blossoms from little

hands. Ellen forgot her ivories. Perhaps they had never, in her mind been more than the pretext for meeting the spring. Hugh had ignored them altogether. They began at once, probably from childish habit, to pick violets, in an absorbed industry. Everything smelled divinely. They got the indescribable scent of the ground. Some tension in Ellen broke, and her body relaxed with the beneficence of sweet air after the strain of the past. She hummed a little as she gathered, and her mouth grew soft. Hugh stopped suddenly and, lying on his elbow, looked up at her where she sat.

"Say, Ellen," said he, "my father wants to buy your place."

The corners of her mouth tightened, and joy spilled out of them. Here were the old specters back again. The spring had to give place to them.

"He always wanted to," she said hotly. "He came over and asked father lots of times. I heard him. Father wouldn't do it. And your father was real mad."

"Well," said Hugh, "you needn't sell, if you don't want to. You don't want to, do you, Ellen?"

A flash ran across her eyes.

"Of course I don't want to," she said. "It's our house, just as much as your house is yours. S'pos'n' mother and I wanted to buy that. You wouldn't sell it, would you?"

Hugh's heart was entirely in tune with her anger, but he had no studied consolation for her.

"Well," said he, "then you tell your mother, if she don't want to sell not to do it. Tell her to say 'no' right out, flat. Father won't take anything else for an answer. He'll just go on thorning her."

"Why, I don't have to. Mother don't want to sell," said Ellen.

Hugh had the prevailing opinion of Ardelia. He knew she was little calculated to withstand the shock of his father's importunity, its grinding force.

"She might think she'd got to," he temporized. "Anyhow, you keep on as well as you can, and when I've got a job you'll be all right."

It was the awkward assurance of the golden shower he meant to pour on her, but Ellen felt only the rawness of it. She had bound her violets with a long grass spire, and now she got up quickly, holding them tight, and faced him with angry eyes.

"You can keep your money," said she, "you and your father both. Mother'n' I don't want it."

Hugh came to his feet, his face, too, dyed red, but only with the shame and misery of his task. He had a desperate feeling that if he could get it over to-day he might turn his mind wholeheartedly to other things. Ellen had got to understand that there was going to be between them the thing called love; she must understand it fully so as to fit her life to the certainty of it, and, when he could marry her, be ready for that last inevitable state. But how to tell her? He couldn't do it as the stories did. No earthly power should induce him to say he loved her; determined as he was to take the tragic plunge of actual plighting, he was boy enough to call it silly. Her brown eyes flamed upon him. His own glared back, and quite before he had made any decision about a conquering course, he had thrown both arms about her and the two young things were struggling with all their strength. Hugh had not meant to struggle, but fate had brought on him the mad necessity. Ellen fought insanely, like a lithe tigerish animal; Hugh had a dogged staying power and held her desperately. It seemed to him, though the capacity for clear thought had left him,

that his future salvation in a mysteriously trying world depended on the way he bore himself now. Perhaps even his fiddle playing depended on it, though he was not thinking of the fiddle — and scarcely, indeed, of the girl. Only to hold her. It became evident at length that she was crying, great tears that splashed his face; but instead of making him compassionate, they only enraged him, because she was unfair to make so terrible an appeal. And he heard himself saying over and over, as he held her tighter and felt her strugglings less:

"Say it, then! say it!"

But what did he want her to say? Some way, he knew, she must bind herself to him, so that he could go and make his fortune and feel safe about her while he was gone. And suddenly a sickness came over him. He hated himself. He seemed to himself more vile and brutal than he had felt the day he shot the oriole to try the gun Larry had lent him. And Ellen was talking now, in a high hysterical voice, and like him she was saying one thing over and over:

"If you kiss me, I never'll forgive you as long as I live, never, never." The "never" was the word she kept repeating. He opened his arms and let her go so suddenly that she staggered and then went on her knees on the violet bank where her bunch of flowers had fallen. And Hugh heard himself saying:

"I don't want to kiss you," and, to his horrified shame, turned about and leaned against a tree and began to cry.

That was the way Larry Greene, going across to the high road and turning aside when he heard the girl's voice, saw him, and these were the words he heard him say. Larry stood there a minute and watched them out of his keen black eyes. He read the boy's misery very

well, though he could not know that Hugh was really crying from a wild despairing sense that she ought to have understood. She could have made it all perfectly plain and pleasant between them if she had not been so stupid and so hateful. Larry stood there a moment and then, when the girl came to her feet, wiping her face anyhow with her apron and now clinging to the violets, he slipped away through the bushes because he knew it would stamp her with everlasting shame to know a man had seen her misery. Hugh had managed to rub off his own tears; he turned upon her and spoke gruffly, with a large carelessness:

"You needn't act like that. Anybody'd think —" there he paused.

What anybody would think he did not know. Deep in his stricken heart was his consciousness of having sinned and spoiled the day, perhaps the world. If she would laugh out now, he thought, and act as if he'd been silly and that was all — this he thought as we wonder if we may not wake in the midst of some dire misery and find it only a dream — why, then he could laugh, too. But he knew also that Ellen was not that kind of girl and that because she was not, he wanted to bind her all the more, so that he might never lose her. It was as important to make sure she was his as it would be to keep his own mother from wandering off in an erratic star course, to leave him desolate. But Ellen did not look at him. There they stood with the trampled violet bank between them, for a minute — two — three — and then she turned away. He called her name, and she did not answer, and he started after her, stricken, like a dog beaten and bent on forgiveness. And now she did turn on him, her face quivering and her voice also, when she spoke.

"If you come one step after me," she told him, "I never'll speak to you again as long as I live."

So he stayed, and she ran through the woods and up the lane and home; and when he no longer heard the crackling of twigs under her feet, he threw himself down on the ground and, with his face in the bruised violets, tasted grief.

When Ellen came over the wall and into the yard her mother was at the back door, shading her eyes with her hand and looking for her. Ardelia was somewhat brighter to-day because she had been busy, laying away her husband's clothes, and, truly sad as the task was to her, she yet felt her blood moving more equably from the interest of it.

"Where you been?" she said, as Ellen came up to her with lagging feet. Ellen felt suddenly tired and dreary; the spring day had paled about her. But when Ardelia saw the bunch of violets in her hand she was satisfied. She felt benevolently that the child had known how to hearten herself after the last solemn days. "Well, ain't you got a color!" she exclaimed admiringly. "You must ha' been runnin'."

"Mother," said Ellen, "what makes us have anything to do with the Neales, just because our land sets into theirs?"

Ardelia stared.

"Why," said she, "Mary Neale's a nice woman. I don't know what you've got against Mary Neale."

"I haven't got anything," said Ellen. "But Mr. Neale wants to buy our place, and — mother, you won't sell our place, will you?"

Ardelia was looking at her keenly.

"Them Neale boys been plaguin' you?" she asked.

"No," said Ellen, her cheeks burning redder. "I ain't afraid o' the Neale boys. Mother, you won't sell our place, will you?"

"If they set out to plague you," said Mrs. Neale fiercely, "you give 'em as good as they send. What's put it into your head about sellin' the place?"

"Mr. Neale asked father," said Ellen. "I heard him. You won't, mother, will you?"

"Well," said Ardelia, a rather shrewd look in her eyes, "I should have to find out what he's likely to give."

Ardelia had her own ideas of what it was wise to do in the matter of money and business. She was an absent-minded woman in relation to most of the affairs of life. Method and frugality did not seem important to her; but occasionally, like a vision of great adventure, would strike across her mind the idea of making a hoard of money suddenly. Perhaps she was the readier to believe in her own resourcefulness because her husband had been so lax. She had had wild schemes, at various times, for suddenly lifting their squalid fortunes to a height of dizzying splendor. Perhaps her novel reading helped her paint life a brighter hue. Ellen, who partly understood her, looked at her now in a despairing apprehension. Hugh was right, she reasoned, in seeing there was danger, though he had behaved like a catamount afterward.

"Mother —" she began.

But Ardelia interrupted her with a bright cheerfulness born, Ellen knew, of this alluring vision of selling the house.

"Come," said she, "we'll dig a few dandelions for dinner. I'll get us some pans an' knives."

They went about the yard on their knees, digging the dandelions, and occasionally Ellen gave a little sobbing

sigh and Ardelia glanced at her. Ardelia had still a feeling that the Neale boys might have been plaguing her. It was a fine, soft turf with thick grass inhospitable to dandelions, and they dug a long time to get their mess. The sun, as he rode higher, warmed them consolingly. It was yet near enough the banished cold to make spring sunshine an unwonted bliss, and they felt its kindliness creeping through their veins and giving them, if not joyance, a measure of content. A little after eleven Thomas Neale drove by, home early from market. He did not look at them. He always drove sitting tall, and staring ahead. But Ardelia rose and stretched herself and looked after him. Ellen glanced up at her and then came also to her feet.

"Mother," she said, "you won't sell it, will you?"

But Ardelia did not seem to hear.

"You go down sullar," she said, "an' bring up a mite o' that pork Mary Neale sent in. She said not to mention it; so you be careful."

V

That night Hugh was lounging about the orchard, examining a tree trunk here and there. You would have said he was hunting for insect pests, but really he was keeping an eye on the little house and wondering if Ellen would ever come into the yard and perhaps throw a neighborly word to him. She never had signaled him. She never would, he believed, but he was sick with the thought that she was justly "mad." Ben, coming up the lane, was calling to him, and Hugh sauntered that way because it would take him nearer the little house.

"He wants you," said Ben, when he was near enough to speak with caution.

"Larry?"

"Yes. I been down there to borrow a fish-hook. He wants you to-night, same's he said."

"All right. Byme-by."

"Go ahead now. He—" "he," at this point, was Thomas Neale—"he was in the sitting-room when I went. Squire Greene's come over. It's sump'n' about land."

Hugh also judged it might be safe to disappear while his father's mind was elsewhere. He took to the lane and, after a dallying walk, because he could not snatch his thoughts away from Ellen, brought up at the little dark house where Larry sat by the window, smoking. Hugh walked in and took his chair without a word. Sometimes their intercourse was as wordless as that of two Indians. But in a few minutes Larry took the pipe out of his mouth and spoke harshly what he had meant to offer plausibly.

"Hugh, what the devil do you mean, trying to throw a girl over your shoulder and carry her off, like a savage? You're not a cave man. I'm not either, or I should have hit you over the head with a club."

Hugh sat still, hot with rage. For the moment he had no shame. Anger had swallowed it up. Chiefly he was conscious of the injustice of the world. It was impossible for him to untangle the threads that had made him fling his arms about Ellen, if that was what Larry meant by being a cave man. He was still obstinately conscious that he hadn't wanted to, and if she had said something she easily might have said, he would have been only too relieved to abandon the struggle — a dare, it seemed to be — and let her go. But this he was not ready to tell Larry, who was wandering on in a meditative way, not perhaps so kindly as usual, but as if he had made up his mind to say a certain thing.

"Boys go through a lot," he was saying, "because they have to find out everything by themselves. I don't know why. I'm damned if I know why. But it seems to be so." There was something resentful, querulous, in his manner, as if he were tempted to save Hugh the path of misery that came by ignorance. But he evidently relinquished that and ended: "Anyhow, if you want to please a girl, don't knock her down before you tell her so."

His voice grew suddenly hostile and Hugh thought he, too, was going to offer to break every bone in his body. And, out of the depths of the injustice where he floundered, Hugh spoke growlingly:

"I don't want to please 'em."

"That's right," said Larry. "Let 'em alone." He had knocked out his pipe as if he didn't mean to smoke again; but now he began filling it, pushing down the tobacco in the bowl with an angry haste. "You know,"

he said as he lighted it, a word or two between puffs, "it's too hard. Everything's too hard. We make all our mistakes before our mothers' milk is out of us. See here, Hugh, what do you know about me?"

Hugh had cooled appreciably, and the sudden introspective change in the man's attack brought his curiosity to the fore. Larry had never talked to him about anything but fiddles.

"I don't know anything," he said, yet aware that he had been told a good many things, or had picked them up when elders were off their guard.

"Don't lie," said Larry. "You've been told things. If you hadn't, what do you run away for, to come down here. You've been told I'm no good. Brother Abial's a respectable man. I'm not like Brother Abial. So I'm bad. Brother Abial settled down on the old place and married and makes more money every year, and I'm a kind of a hermit and live alone and keep a bottle in the cupboard. What do they say now, bad or crazy? Which is it?"

"Both," said Hugh.

"Both? That's worse than I thought. Well, which do you say?"

"I don't say either," said Hugh miserably. It had been a hard day for him. "I meant, some folks say one thing, some another."

"Let them say it," said Larry. He took out his pipe, and sat looking from the window, his white strong teeth set hard and his lips drawn slightly back from them. "I'll tell you what I am. I'm a New England Puritan, more righteous than any of 'em. I'm so righteous that I've gone to the devil altogether. I was so righteous I wouldn't tell my father a lie when he was dying and he wanted me to promise to give up Clara Morse —"

"Why," broke in Hugh, "that's the squire's wife."

"So my father left the place away from me, and Abial settled down there, and he married Clara. He knew father'd rather sink the old place in a frog-pond than have a Morse reign over it. But he didn't care. And if I'd promised father and broken it, same as he did, I should have been living there with Clara Morse myself."

He laughed, in a scornful way, and Hugh thought it seemed as if he did not consider it desirable after all to have married Clara Morse.

"So what did I do?" inquired Larry. "I bought this house, and I settled down here to live like a pig and mad Brother Abial. That was because I was so righteous. Don't you see? An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Brother Abial had got the old place away from me, and I came here to be a thorn in Brother Abial's side."

Hugh could not speak. He felt a sort of terror. Larry, as he was now, he had never seen.

"Whatever you do," said Larry, puffing away, in an unstinted absorption in his pipe, "don't quarrel with your brother."

"Ben?" said Hugh, innocent that such a thing could be. "No. 'Course not."

"There's nothing bitterer," said Larry. "Nothing. You can fight with a stranger and come off best man, and shake hands again. But if you fight with your brother, it poisons you through and through. I don't know what I sent for you for," he added. "I had some kind of idea you were growing up and I'd got to talk to you and save you from things. But that's all I can think of. Don't you quarrel with your brother, unless you want to get warped and twisted out of recognition, and don't you plague little girls. Hullo! Ellen, that you?"

Ellen had appeared at the open door with a parcel in her hands, a loaf of bread rolled up in a towel. She had been running through the woods because sometimes the path was black to her and she wanted to get home before dark; and she had reached the door too quickly to see in advance whether Larry was alone. If she had seen, she might have taken her loaf away into the wood recesses and waited with it until Hugh had gone. Hugh, at sight of her, felt the choking of the heart and the miserable sickness that comes when we have destroyed our own house of life which might as well have been left standing in the airs of peace. If only he had not done that strange thing he had not meant to do, Ellen would say "Hullo" to him and he would say "Hullo" to her. Neither of them would necessarily have anything to say after that, nor need they look at each other again; but the world would be left in its fairness and decency. Now Ellen stood there in the doorway, the red in her cheeks from running and her breath coming quickly, and she did not seem to see him at all.

"Here's your bread, Mr. Greene," she said. "Shall I put it in the jar?"

"Yes," said Larry, "yes, Ellen. You were a good girl to bring it. Put it in the jar."

While she did it and then, with deft touches did a little picking up about the room, Larry was silent, smoking, his eyes half closed in luxurious content.

"Wait a minute," he said, when she had finished her hurried tasks. "Here, I'll light the lantern."

He took it down from its nail beside the chimney, and lighted it. Ellen waited, not guessing why. He had always known she could run through the woods in the dark.

"You take the lantern," he said to Hugh. And then to Ellen, "Hugh's going home with you."

Hugh was instantly on his feet, and snatched the lantern. He was all a glow of relief and eagerness. Larry had guessed right. The thing he could do to give the boy back his self-respect was to trust him to protect a girl, not to plague her. But Ellen seemed to have turned suddenly to a little woman, a lady, indeed, all icy self-possession.

"I'm not afraid, Mr. Greene," she said. "I don't want anybody to go home with me."

"'Course you're not afraid," said Larry. "But you might stub your toe over a root. Go along, both of you. I want to read my paper."

So Ellen, with her head up, walked out into the night, and Hugh, his sudden relief gone, miserably followed her. Neither of them ever knew that Larry, too, was following at a distance. He had them on his mind. They were both intimately dear to him. He meant to understand Hugh thoroughly in this matter of plaguing a girl. Ellen walking resolutely, rather slowly now, her head still up, went along the wood path, and Hugh, with the lantern, followed. When they came to the big boulder where there were tall pines on both sides and where he knew, if they stopped, they could find ivories even by feeling in the dark, the absurdity of it came over him and he called to her:

"Say, you let me go ahead. The lantern don't do you any good back here."

Ellen did not answer. Once she did stumble over a root, yet, Hugh angrily thought, she knew that root by heart. Instantly she recovered herself and he called:

"Look here! you let me go ahead."

She did not answer, and he was the angrier because here the path was wide enough for him to pass her, and yet inexplicably he dared not. Something in her dauntless back seemed to have imposed a foolish distance between

them. If he quickened his steps would she begin to run, and then would he have that horrible feeling that she thought he was pursuing her? When they were near the entrance to the lane he called to her miserably:

"Ellen, you let me go by you, so you can see your way."

Larry, listening, thought he was crying, and turned back at ease. Ellen, too, thought he was crying, and she was glad. A feeling of proper dignity rose in her, now that things were on the right basis. When she entered the lane, she did quicken her pace a little. If she had been alone, it was here she would have begun to run; but like Hugh she was afraid, not of pursuit but a possible triumph in his mind. As she reached the head of the lane, she turned her head slightly, in acute listening. It seemed to her he was not following, and the slender lantern rays were less effectual. Where he put the lantern out and where he dropped off altogether she did not know. She mounted the wall with dignity and crossed her own yard to the kitchen where mother yawningly awaited her.

"Wa'n't it dark comin' through the woods?" asked Ardelia.

"Yes," said Ellen, "kinder dark."

"I might ha' come an' met you," said Ardelia.

But Ellen was glad she had not.

Hugh slipped into the barn and set the lantern in a corner behind the highest mow where he and Ben kept a hidey-hole. Father was a little cautious of climbing. He had a rheumatic knee. But Hugh considered it undesirable for father to see the lantern and ask whose it was and how he had happened to be at Larry Greene's and what he wanted of a lantern anyway. Then he went into the house, and stumbled into a talk between his father and Squire Greene. Neither man turned about or in any way recog-

nized him as he came in, and he knew it was not the place for him and hurried through the room into the kitchen. But he carried the picture of them in his mind, sitting one at one end of the hearth and one at the other, as if it had been a winter night, though the bricks were cold and the world alive with airs of spring. But the two big chairs of the room were here by the fireplace, and these were men who chose the conventionally dignified place. As Hugh went out, he heard the conclusion of a sentence and afterward snatches of talk that made him wonder why men were always trying to buy and sell. He was beginning to be disturbed by the implication that things could not always remain as he was born to them. It gave him a shock of surprise, indeed of offense, to think property he was used to considering "ours" could pass into other hands.

"Anyways," Squire Greene was saying, "I could have gone to your sister first. Only I judged it best to come to you."

He was a man of fifty, with the look of an older generation. When he was young, those who had seen his father, old Squire Greene, walk with dignity about the neighborhood, said this son was his very image. That was why they had begun to call him squire when he inherited the old house, though the title, in its first significance, died with an elder time. He was a thin man, erect, with cold blue eyes and a mouth shut tight in firmness or in pride. You would expect from that face a discreet wariness, neither compassion nor the warmer faults and virtues. He lacked mental distinction, yet he longed, with a meager craving known only, in its tenacity, to Larry, for the renown of public office. He saw himself, with an unappeasable longing, at the state capital, saw bundles of mail coming to him, reports, newspapers, because he

was Abial Greene, Representative. Yet he had never come within hopeful distance of his goal. Nobody in his own township voted for a cold, hard man who did nothing for the public welfare and had no grace even to promise speciously.

While the two men talked together, Hugh could read offense in his father's voice.

"Tabitha," he was saying, "does own the wood lot, but she's no desire to sell."

"A spinster," said Squire Greene, "can't be expected to feel as a married woman does, not when it comes to land."

"I don't know why she can't," said Neale aggressively. "I've got two boys."

"Well," said Squire Greene, "they ain't her boys."

He, like his brother Larry, had gone to the Academy of their day, but he used homely speech among the men he lived and worked with. Perhaps now he could not have been at ease in any other: yet he saw himself rising, at the capital, to address the House.

"That's neither here nor there," said Neale. "She'll leave 'em what she's got."

"You don't know whether she will or not," said Squire Greene. He was moved to what he felt to be a justifiable resentment because he was withstood. "A good many women'd ruther have the money in hand an' spend it durin' their lifetime."

He wished he had not come to Neale. Tabitha, he thought contemptuously, he might have persuaded, a poor bivery thing. Neale, he had felt, was the block in his path and so he had meant to influence him first. But it had been ill-judged.

"Tabitha has a home with me," Neale was saying, and Squire Greene came in on the word, as if to forestall any credit to fraternal bounty.

"Your father so specified in his will,— her home an' the wood lot."

"Be that as it may," Neale said obstinately, "Tabitha never'll sell."

There was silence between them for a minute, a long minute it seemed to Hugh. Then the squire pushed his chair back and got on his feet.

"Well," said he, "I guess I'll be goin'."

Neale too got up and followed him to the door. Hugh was excited to find they exchanged no more words, not on the state of the weather or the imminence of planting. Neale shut the door.

"Boys!" he called.

"Yes, sir," said Hugh. He made haste from the kitchen and stood before his father just as Neale was about to mount the stairs.

"You get to bed," said Neale. "You can tell Ben. He's out there in the kitchen. I won't have you bangein' round after eight o'clock. I sent your mother off early. There's a hard day tomorrer."

Hugh went back into the kitchen and waited until he heard his father's feet on the stairs. Then he spoke into the darkness.

"You there?"

"Yes," said Ben. "I've been listening. Ain't it funny? Squire Greene wants to buy the wood lot and father wants to buy Ellen's house. And he —" "he" meant father here —"he's mad as a hen because Squire Greene wants to. Say, do you s'pose Aunt Tab knows the wood lot's hers?"

"'Course she knows it," said Hugh. "Come, we've got to go to bed."

They went up the back stairs, without speaking. When they reached Aunt Tab's door, Ben caught at his brother's

arm and halted him while he scratched slightly on a panel. The door opened softly, and Aunt Tab stood there in garments known as a short-gown and petticoat, her hair done up in an encircling row of curl papers. A bright kitchen lamp, with a piece of red flannel floating in the oil to give a pleasant color, stood on a small table, and on the bed were spread her cards. She had been telling fortunes. When she saw the boys, she stepped back; they went in and she softly closed the door.

"Say, Aunt Tab," said Ben, in the whisper which was the rule of nocturnal visits after father had gone to bed, or had ordered them to go, "d'you know you owned the pine lot?"

"Owned the pine lot?" repeated Aunt Tab. "Why, no, I dunno's I did. Yes, I did, too. Father left it to me."

"Well," said Ben, with an air of great importance, "Squire Greene wants to buy it. It's worth a lot o' money. Pine lumber's high."

A worried frown came on her forehead.

"Why," said she, "I dunno's I want to sell. D'your father want I should?"

"No," said Ben. "He told Squire Greene you wouldn't."

"I never should know how to carry it out," said Aunt Tab, "buyin' an' sellin' land. That's men's work. Anyways, if it's worth anything I'd ruther give it to you boys."

"That's what he told him," said Ben, "he" again meaning father. "How's the cards come out?"

An instant delight ran into her face. It made her incredibly pathetic.

"Why," said she, "mebbe that was it. I dreamt of a letter. It's a kind of a letter, ain't it, findin' out it's a good piece o' property for you boys?"

Ben lifted an admonitory finger, and opened the door. Aunt Tab nodded her good-night, and they stepped softly into their chamber.

"Say," remarked Ben, as they were throwing off their clothes, "that was an awful whopper mother got off, wa'n't it?"

"When?" asked Hugh, waking from his dream of Ellen's stiffened back and his own humiliation.

"When she told him she'd asked Ardelia Brock about selling. She'd laid it onto us well, if we'd told it."

VI

Within the week Thomas Neale went himself to see Ardelia "on a matter of business," he told her, as she met him at the door. Ardelia had seen him coming and taken off her apron in haste. She put up her head a little and primmed her mouth. These were the poor pale petals left from the rose of her youth, not to be displayed, as then, to please, in any facile sense, but to buy her way with the man who had come to bargain. It was all quite unconscious. Ardelia had no belief that Neale could be moved by her old-time coquetry, but she used what weapon she had. She had appeared before him in her scanty calico and thin piteousness, and Neale felt an instant distaste for her. He usually avoided looking at her, the obstructive tenant of the land he coveted; but now he had to face this welcoming parade and he inwardly repudiated it. He was as far as age from youth in appraising woman's claims; but it did seem to him the female ought to be a wholesome, modest creature. And Ardelia was odious to him.

"Won't you come in?" she asked, not with the civil indifference of Bromley, but effusively even.

"No," said Neale roughly. This was the tone he would have taken with his wife, if she had ignored the bounds of decorum, and he felt it was a man's part to use it to any woman who overstepped. But with the word he bethought him that this was no way to buy and sell. You had to conciliate. "Yes," he said unwillingly, "I'll step in a minute."

He followed her into the sitting-room, with a sense of

awkward repugnance for his task. He had not entered the house for years, and now here he was, unworthily, because he wanted to buy. Ardelia drew forward an armchair and herself took the little rocker by the window. She sat there and faced him intrepidly. Neale knew that, in acceptance of the situation, she was braver than he.

"We're havin' a nice spell o' weather," said she, "for the time o' year."

He sat frowning at the floor, his big hands on his knees. To this conventional approach he made no answer, but began abruptly from his own point.

"I s'pose you know what I've come for."

"Well!" said Ardelia tentatively. She could not guess whether it would further her cause to meet him with full knowledge, or to play indifference and coyness. He was frowning more openly now, and Ardelia took an instant's excursion from the matter in hand to think how hard a lot was Mary Neale's to live under the blackness of that brow.

"You thinkin'," he asked, forcing himself to confront her eyes, "of sellin' your place?"

"Why, no," said Ardelia. "I guess Ellie 'n' I might as well stay right along here. I don't see what better we could do."

"If you sold," said he, "you'd have the money in hand, an' you could go where you like." It was difficult for him to summon words of that complexion. He was not used to persuading. "If you stay here, where be ye?"

"Well," said Ardelia, "be that as it may, so long's we stay here we've got a roof over our heads."

"I should think two women folks could go off, if they had a little money in their pockets, an' take a room somewheres, some thicker settled place. You could find somethin' to do. Your girl's old enough to work."

Ardelia was a silly woman from many aspects, but she did feel satirically the value of this. A bloodless creature toward the world, she was a passionate mother; and the vision of Ellen's soft contours, her undeveloped loveliness, abraded by the world's contact, roused in her an unformulated antagonism. She felt the fierceness of the defender of helpless innocence; but at the same time her simple craft told her she must veil emotion, and she took refuge in her own stupidity, so natural a resort that she did it with a completeness that was clever.

"I dunno what we could do," she said heavily.

Neale felt the lift of spirit attendant on a deal successfully begun.

"That'll come of itself," he said. "You're a good strong woman an' the girl's growin' up. Come! what'll you take for the place."

He was rushing her, and Ardelia felt suddenly helpless. The masculine quality was carrying her along. He was too direct for her. She had depended on doubling.

"I dunno," she repeated faintly, "as I want to sell."

"Come, come," said Neale not unkindly, but aware that this was the moment to press advantage to the utmost, "what'll you take?"

But Ardelia did not have to tell. There was a rush from the kitchen and Ellen, in a desperate haste and misery, came flying in. She looked like a young rough-clothed nymph caught from her revel on a mountain top, disheveled, red, angry at what she found in the valley below, and determined to make herself felt there. She had been working in the garden, in a state of warm happiness, her old skirt all over dirt, her hands black with it, and her very flesh and mind saturate with the breath of earth. Ellen had these times of absorption into the life

of the world. There she was happy. She seemed to herself, when the garden had received her and made her one with its needs, happy beyond the power of understanding, happy even though her father was dead and, in that uncomprehended separation, she ached at night and cried into her pillow. He, too, had loved the garden. He had had there rapt moments of losing himself in the life of the soil, and Ellen felt this morning almost as if they were working together over the lettuce bed. It was a way of meeting him, the breath, the spirit of him, with no queerness of her mother's dull grief to recall her to an expected melancholy. But in the midst of her digging, when she sat on her knees, both bare hands plunged into the earth, she heard Neale's voice. Instantly she knew why he had come, and got to her feet, to listen. She crept under the window and did listen, and with every word her rage rose higher. She was in a panic for fear her mother should say some irrevocable thing. In her ignorance, she saw the house and the loved soil which was kissing her hands, lost to her — to her father, too, for he seemed nearer still and poignantly wronged,— and, regardless of her dirt and disarray, she ran in and took her place by her mother's side. Neale looked up at the rush of her coming, and when he found her confronting him, flaring at him with hostile eyes, he realized the attack had significance for him alone. He tried to look her down, but Ellen, outside herself, returned the look with a heat that seemed to seethe. Ardelia was aghast. She had only dread of such a wildfire. She thought of reminding Ellen that she was a dirty girl and must go out and get washed up, but Neale gave her no time for maternal suasion. He removed his gaze from Ellen and turned to her mother, calmly, as if little girls had no business to rush to the saving of their homes.

"Come," he said, "you set a price. You must ha' thought o' somethin'. If you ain't, I'll name one myself."

"Don't you do it, mother," Ellen cried piercingly. She put a trembling hand on her mother's shoulder, a little grimy paw, infinitely pathetic in its dirt and persuasive grasp. "We don't want to sell our house," she continued, to Neale. "It's our house. It's just as much ours as your house is yours, and we shouldn't think of selling it any more'n you would. I guess if we should come and ask you how much you'd take for your house, you'd say 'twas funny. Well, it's no more funny than your coming here."

Neale looked at her in a growing aversion. He was exceedingly annoyed: not that she impressed him, but because he saw himself giving up his quest now and coming again when the little miss was safely away. He thought she was badly brought up, and concluded, as critical elders have a way of doing, that if she'd been his girl she would have turned out very differently. He rose and Ardelia, shaking off the grimy paw on her shoulder, rose, too, almost as annoyed as he. She had not known whether she wanted to make a trade; but Ellen had prevented her from even finding out.

"You think it over," Neale was repeating. "The offer's open. You let me know."

To Ellen's mind it was dangerous to allow him to go with anything half accepted, half understood. She had lost her first excitement under the coldness of his eyes, but she had still the warmth of her fighting blood.

"We sha'n't let you know," she said. "This is our house. It was my father's house. It's his now. And it's going to be, forever and ever."

Now Neale looked directly at her, down at her, exas-

peratingly, he was so tall. He addressed her for the first time.

"If you were a girl of mine," he said, "I'd see to it you were well trounced."

Then he walked out of the door, without another glance, and Ardelia turned to her with a reproachful:

"Well, if you ain't done it now, I'll miss my guess."

Ellen flung away from her to the fireplace and grasped the mantel, holding it with her two little hands, and cried tempestuously. She had lost her sense of garden happiness. She was here shut up in a room with a mother who didn't care for her and hadn't cared for her father, or she wouldn't have listened to a man who wanted their house. Ardelia went about the room, picking up an article here and there, with an annoyed sense that she must find some excuse for keeping near the child while she was crying so, and yet not daring to speak to her or touch her. She had never seen these tempestuous possibilities in her. They were terrifying to Ardelia. Nothing seemed worth such passion. She wanted to beg Ellen to stop lest she break a blood-vessel, but she dared not. And Ellen herself ended the wretched situation. She put both hands to her face and went blindly out of the room, and her mother heard her sobbing through the hall and kitchen. Ardelia went to the window and saw her crossing the yard, hurrying, wiping her face savagely and climbing the wall. Ardelia knew where she was going. It must be, she thought, down to the violet wood where the children had always loved to play. But it was instead, instinctively and without formulated hope, to Larry. Since she had not her father, Larry was her refuge.

When she came in on him he was sitting at his writing-table, absorbed and, her tumultuous mind told her, aloof

from her. But Larry glanced up and, seeing her perturbed face, laid down his pen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"He wants to buy our place," said Ellen. She stood before him and held her hands clasped at her sides: she was trembling miserably.

"Neale?" said Larry. "Well, you needn't sell it to him."

"Mother'll want to," said Ellen. "And if she wants to, I can't help it."

Larry drummed on the table and wondered. There was nothing to say to her. Nobody knew what Ardelia would take into the emptiness of her silly head. If David Brock had been alive and such a tear-stained trembling Ellen had run to him, he would have taken her into kind arms and stroked her. But to Larry, Ellen was not the child she had been. She was exquisite womanhood at its dawn, with a woman's right of sanctuary in her own defenses. He could not offer her platitudes. Really, he couldn't think of them. All he could think of were little words, and one of them "darling." But he did speak finally, while she looked at him with a baby hope in her eyes: for if he couldn't do anything, who could?

"It's a confounded shame," said he. Then he plucked up something that might be remotely practical.

"You know," he said, "it doesn't belong to your mother wholly. Some of it belongs to you."

She looked at him with wistful, lovely eyes.

"Does it?" she asked. "I should think 'twould be all mother's and she could do anything she wanted to."

"No," said Larry. "There'd have to be things done about it in the court."

"Then it isn't fair," said Ellen. She was irrationally, in one of her warm impetuosities, veering to her mother.

"We've got nothing to live on, you know, except what you pay us. If mother wants to sell, she ought to be allowed to."

Here Larry had an impetuosity of his own.

"Let me buy it, Ellen, and hold it for you. Mortgage — you know what that is. Mighty good thing for me — make me buckle down to my scribbling. I could keep the interest paid anyhow, and we'd see what would happen."

He had done her, he realized ruefully, some good. She was facing him in scorn and anger, and her eyes were dry.

"We don't want your money," said she. "Mrs. Neale brought mother six dollars and I'm going to pay that back. And the coffin —" There the tears flooded her again and she shuddered, remembering the terrible coffin and the cold majesty it held.

Larry got up and, moved out of his scruples, went to her and put an arm about her shaking shoulders.

"Ellen," said he, "that last you must never speak about again — or think about it. Your father and I were old chums. I did it for him — not your mother or you. It's between him and me. Wipe that right out of your little mind."

For a minute or two he held her and she cried tempestuously. Then she ran out of the house, and Smilie, thinking it was a game, went leaping after her, catching at her skirts.

But the next day, when Ardelia came to do his sweeping, Larry broke without preamble into an explanation of her inherited rights over the little place. She couldn't sell it out of hand, he told her, with no reference to Ellen. Ardelia hardly believed him, but she made him repeat his elucidations several times, and then, when her sweeping was done, went with them straight to Thomas Neale whom

she found crossing the road after his forenoon's fencing in the field opposite his house. Ardelia was not coquettish to-day. She was entirely absorbed in the rights of inheritance. Until this moment the law had never presented itself to her as a deterrent force, except perhaps in the case of definable acts such as robbery or arson. She repeated, with a commendable clearness, what Larry had said.

"D'you know it?" she asked. "D'you know I couldn't sell?"

"Why, there's steps to take," said Neale, in scorn of her futility. "Ye didn't s'pose ye could do it without takin' steps?"

Ardelia shook her head sadly.

"I couldn't take 'em," said she, "if Ellen's got any say. She never'd let me in the world."

She went thoughtfully home and Neale, disproportionately moved over a situation he could not control, passed Hugh, raking the yard of chips and dead leaves. He stopped, on a sudden impulse, that barbaric desire to wound because we have ourselves been hurt. But Hugh was working absorbedly, with long strokes of the rake, and his father could not, for the moment, think how to pass on his own rebuff — unless, indeed, to Ellen.

"I don't want you to have anything to do with that Brock girl," he said. "She's a sassy jade."

Hugh's rake slackened for an instant; but he did not look up, and his father went on. Then Hugh did glance after him, though without ceasing to work, and his eyes were hot with hate. Everything, he felt, was combining to separate him from Ellen, and since Ellen's father had died, he got in his own shifting of the rebuff that hurt him by wishing his own father would die, too.

After this, though the selling of the house hung over Ellen like a menace, she said no more about it, and Ardelia, who had come into a curious respect for her, as an individual of property rights, wondered if she could really have forgotten. But Ellen was remembering the more apprehensively; only this amazing fact of ownership had challenged something stiffly magnanimous in her and she would have shrunk from besieging Ardelia with her old bravado. Neale abominated them both, the silly woman and her headstrong child, though, indeed, with no more personal aversion than for any obstacle that blocked his purposes. So did he scowl in the face of the thunder shower that forbade his getting in his hay. But the tyrant in him had to compromise with the astuteness of the bargainer, and one day, meeting Ardelia in the road, he forced himself to a qualified appeal, because at least he must be safe.

"Well," said he, with a civility he grudged her, "you made up your mind to sell?"

"No," said Ardelia tremulously. "I dunno how I could. There's Ellen."

"Anyways," said Neale, "you could pass your word you'd give me the first offer."

"Yes, oh, yes," said Ardelia, "I'll do that!" and fled along the road.

And he judged it best to let the matter drop.

VII

For weeks, Ellen and Hugh did not speak. Hugh hadn't known it was going to be one of those estrangements which were absurdly common among the children of the neighborhood: small red-hot disputes that bloomed into feuds and seeded off into silence. And then, tired of the inconvenience and dullness of that, the disputants spoke again and had warm intimacies until another nervous crisis rose and somebody "didn't speak." But these were the younger children. Hugh had no idea any such coldness could ever touch him, or that it would chill him if it did. But one day in midsummer, when he and Ben went across the road to the sweet-bough tree, and they had both filled their pockets and meantime their mouths, he saw Ellen going by. She carried a book, a great volume of Abbott's "Napoleon." The boys knew where she had been: to the little circulating library, a mile and a half away, in the house of old Sally Wheeler, who was eccentric enough to believe somebody ought to provide the neighborhood with reading matter, and who bought books and let them out for five cents a week. The neighborhood thought it a poor kind of a thing to do, and scorned her adherence to the rule of five cents. If anybody had a book, they said, they should think she'd be glad and thankful to lend it without askin' five cents.

"Hullo," said Ben idly. "There's Ellie. I should think she'd got a dictionary."

Hugh felt a sudden lightness at sight of her. She had been mysteriously absent from all their common haunts.

He could not think she had wilfully hidden away from him, though he never forgot their struggle. But here she was again, and the day was bright, and father gone to the lower meadow to take back a strayed yearling, and the green apples had the touch of unripe wonderfulness he had been waiting for a whole year.

"Hullo!" he called. "Hullo, Ellen!"

He threw an apple and it hit her exactly where he had intended, on a fold of her skirt so that she might know it was a greeting and not a missile. But Ellen did not look up. She lifted her big book higher in the crook of her arm and walked on.

"She's mad because you threw an apple at her," said Ben casually. "Throw another and hit that bow on the back of her head. I bet I could."

But Hugh had dropped the handful of apples he held, and stood staring after her, his mouth open, and his eyes big in disconcerted wonder. He couldn't discuss the probabilities of the situation with Ben, who knew nothing of the unforgotten encounter in the woods, which was no clearer to him now than it had been at the time. Hugh had been trying to forget it, but it poisoned his well-being. He had not even been to Larry's as before, because he didn't dare wonder what Larry really thought of him, and with the dumb acquiescence of boyhood he couldn't ask. Suddenly it seemed to him that, if he accepted this last slight from Ellen, it would all be over and life an unbearable thing. He started at a run and cleared the wall, Ben calling after him:

"Here! where you going?"

He overtook her a little distance up the road where the locust trees hang their plumes sweetly in the time of bloom, and though she heard him running she did not turn, but held her book the more tightly and walked on.

"Ellen!" said he, when he had come up with her and fallen into step. "Ellen!"

She did not incline her obstinate face an inch toward him; but Hugh, gazing despairingly at her, thought she did not look very well. She was pale, it was true. He, too, had lost a shade of color, and the freckles above his nose stood out queerly against their pallid ground. But Ellen wouldn't turn to find out that. Perhaps if she had seen what a miserable lad he was, maidenly dignity might have weakened slightly and told her he had been punished enough. Hugh walked along beside her, his heart in tumult. There was nothing, within reach of his unhappy will, to say to her. He could not entreat. He could not explain. How could anybody explain what he didn't understand himself? But when they came to the gate of the little house, despair laid hold of him and dragged out his appeal. And these were the words it took.

"Say, Ellen, don't you want some sweet-boughs?"

It was, if force counted for anything, the overflow of a bursting heart. But Ellen, though she heard it, did not answer. She unlatched the gate, went in and closed it carefully behind her. She proceeded quite primly up the path, not hurrying her pace, and walked into the front room where her mother sat, relining a coat for Larry Greene. There she laid her book on the table and, suddenly hot, threw off her hat and threaded back her hair.

"Who's that with you?" asked Ardelia. "One o' the Neale boys?"

"Yes," said Ellen. "Mother, ain't you hot?"

"What'd he want?" asked Ardelia, holding up a sleeve and frowning at it.

"Nothing, I guess," said Ellen. "I'll go and pump up, and we'll have a cool drink."

Hugh, standing there by the gate, bruised and again

bewildered, could hardly have told what he wanted. To have the world the same again, to eat green apples all the afternoon with father down at the lower meadow and perhaps go sauntering through the woods to Larry and talk idly about fiddles and hedgehogs and the tame gray squirrel that took liberties with Larry's pockets — that was a life worth living. But it was all over and done. With the bitter foreknowledge of youth, he tasted age and despair. The sky darkened over him, and, as he turned listlessly home again, the ancient cry was in his heart. To die, that was it, the old, old desire for escape. And then he met Aunt Tab coming toward him upon the road, clad in her best dotted muslin and a befringed silk cape of ancient lineage. Aunt Tab was an arresting figure on the high-road, because she went abroad so seldom that the adventure was grave to her and she met it with a brightened glance, a high color and a bridling step. She held a steeple-crowned green parasol over her head at an angle that admitted the sun, and the reflected light tinged her cheeks unhappily. She wore a bonnet, very old, inherited from a relation so rich that everything she had owned seemed perennially precious to Aunt Tab, and the broad lavender strings, because it was so hot a day, lay upon her thin shoulders. Hugh saw her without interest; he had his own miseries to grapple. Aunt Tab stopped before him.

"Where you goin', Hughie?" she inquired.

"I don't know," said Hugh. "Home, I guess. Headed that way."

"I'm goin' to do somethin'," said Aunt Tab mysteriously. She was whispering now. "It's for you, Hughie. Don't you be discouraged. It's for you."

She nodded vivaciously and lifted her parasol a triumphant inch. Hugh looked at her in a dull acquies-

cence. He didn't want to be stopped on the road to hear of things that were for him. He intended to get home and be let alone. But she had left him, moving lightly with her bridling air, and he put his head down and walked on to the house. There was his mother on the steps, gentle-faced Mary Neale, with the mother look touched now by anxiety, and Ben below her on the grass crunching sweet-boughs and all a "pummy" over his chin. This was the way it always happened. The boys didn't think of the sweet-boughs or talk of them: but just before the moment of ripeness they suddenly went mad, like cows in an orchard, and raced for the tree and ate themselves full.

"I wish you wouldn't pick those green apples," said Mary Neale absently, her glance still on the road the way Aunt Tab had gone. "You throw that one away. It's hard as lingdum vitæ. You look at Hugh. He ain't eating any."

Hugh, standing miserably there before them, wished he had the stomach for green apples. But he said nothing, and Ben, behind his mother's glance, took a large cautious bite.

"D'you meet your aunt?" asked Mary Neale of Hugh.

"Yes."

"Where's she going?"

"She didn't say."

"I don't see where under the sun she's going, up along," said Mary anxiously. The boys knew why she was on the lookout. She kept Aunt Tab on her mind a great deal, foolishly so, perhaps — but then Mary had a sense of the dignity of private life, and was always covering up tracks for fear the world would find out there were little tyrannies and mutinies in her kingdom. Sometimes she had a silly fear — quite silly, she told herself —

that Aunt Tab would run away. Often she was afraid Aunt Tab would call on a neighbor and, innocently beguiled by sympathy, tell how Brother Thomas ignored her and how she avoided him.

"He won't be home yet," said Ben carelessly. He was quite willing to pierce the armor of his mother's reserve. It amused him to touch up a big person like mother and see her wince. "'F he sees her, I'll tell him she went to borrow a sleeve pattern."

The color surged over Mary Neale's face.

"Ben," said she, "don't you dare to tell me you'd say anything to your father that wasn't true."

"No'm," said Ben pleasantly; but he smiled and looked her merrily in the eyes.

She knew what the look meant. He had never forgotten the lie she told his father about Ardelia's place, and he had never let her forget it. She understood him perfectly. It was not malice that stored up the lie in his mind. It was an impish mischief. Ben liked to know things the grown-ups kept concealed to hedge their divinity. It amused him to see they had their weaknesses, and he found it useful to bring out his little discoveries, from time to time, to check them in their grand assumptions. In his boyish way he was a good deal of a ripened man of the world, looking tolerantly on at little games and only blocking them when they threatened his. Mary, in anxious nights, had pondered over this matter of her lie and his knowledge of it. He did not think the worse of her, she realized. Only they had a community of guilt, and if, from her plane of authority, she reproved him, he would, without a disrespectful word, remind her that, when temptation came, she, too, was vulnerable. She put out her hand, and rested it on Hugh's shoulder. He looked up at her inquiringly, and she gave him a little smile

and then turned and went into the house. It did her good to feel Hugh's solid bulk under her hand.

Aunt Tab went happily yet warily along the road, much excited by its unfamiliar aspect, for she had not seen it since the early spring. Now the first goldenrod was out, and dust had burdened all the leaves. She had the half terrified apprehensiveness of those who, nervously distraught, fear spaces and, once out of their own four walls, long for them with panic; but she was on an adventure deliberately invited and knew she must not abandon it. And the cause of it, upon this chosen day, was that she had seen Clara Greene, the squire's wife, drive by alone, to visit her daughter at the Mills: she knew she should find Squire Greene alone. The Greene house stood on a little knoll approached by a drive, clover-grown now, but once a marvel of tendance. It was amazing the way the white clover ran into the gravel and graciously carpeted the approaches to the house. There were great gate-posts with urns, and swinging chains at the sides of the stone steps. The house itself, square and beautiful in its ample proportions, was a warm brick. The Lawrence Greene of long ago — it seemed long, though it was only two hundred years — had planned it after his luxurious desires, had lived there delicately with the wife he built it for, and had died, shaken and bewildered, because of her death. After that his brother had inherited, and this brought in a coarser strain from intermarriage with the manufacturing Beltons down by the Mills. Old Squire Larry was remembered with a passing curiosity over his wanting so big a house to keep warm. But he was remembered, too, with a mingled disapproval and unwilling joy, for the old stories set him out well. The dances he had at the great house when dancing was a sin, the punch they

drank, the night when the minister rose from his bed to go over and disperse the merry crew and was so courteously entreated that his homily fell flat,— all these things were told of the former Larry Greene. The present day Larry was putting them in his history of Bromley, the neighbors felt sure, he was so particular in making inquiries about them; but the neighbors did not know that the present squire spoke to his brother Larry, the only time for years, of his own free will, and harshly adjured him, for the family name, to leave such gossip out. And Larry smiled. Half the house was closed in the winter months while the present squire and his wife lived in the kitchen and dining-room and made only frozen excursions into the deserted tract to retrieve articles for use. But in summer weather it was thrown open and breathed again, a cool amplitude full of dignified furniture and softly lustrous pewter and old china, a house to make the antiquary love and lust. Its furnishings were commonplaces to the present squire. He did not know they were beautiful and no dealer had ever told him their value.

As Tabitha walked up the driveway, the faster now as she nervously felt the discomfort of her daring, she saw the squire in shirt-sleeves standing with his hands in his pockets looking at the old tool house, known as the shop, at the east end of the lot. He was wondering if it needed shingling; but to Tabitha it seemed that he was waiting for her.

"Squire Greene!" she called, in a faint voice, and crossed the little plot of grass between them.

He turned.

"Hullo!" said he, in a great surprise. "You here, Tabitha? She's gone to Beckenham." "She" was his wife.

"I didn't come neighborin'," said Tabitha, tremulous,

and feeling her knees weak under her. "I come to have a talk with you. O Squire Greene, you don't think o' buyin' my wood lot, do you?"

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her. A slow smile creased his cheeks. He had a great belief in good luck which was, to his mind, the result of a man's shrewdness. She had come of her own accord, and that was the better for him. He turned toward the house.

"Walk in," he said. "We'll set down an' talk it over."

Tabitha followed him up the steps and through the wide hall to the sitting-room, austere in its antique furnishings. She gained enough composure to glance about her at the dull pink and gray walls, a paper very old, and beautiful beyond the dreams of any that saw it in this generation. It seemed to her a wonderful room. He seated himself opposite her in a straight-backed chair that fitted his own spareness and leaned forward, hands on his knees.

"Well?" said he. There was insistence in his voice. "You've made up your mind to sell."

The haste of it, assertion instead of any coaxing and sympathetic delay, only frightened her.

"Oh, no, I ain't," said she, at once on the edge of her chair, and perched for flight. "I dunno's I could say that. I only come over to see if you had it in mind to buy."

"Oh!" said the squire. He sat a moment and considered, realizing that he had to begin still farther back. He saw, too, that all the coynesses of the intending purchaser had to be brought to bear. "No," said he, "I don't know's I want to buy."

Tabitha was at once on her feet. She was disappointed, but also she was relieved. The adventure had be-

gun to seem a more ultimate one since she had been shut into the rose-gray room.

"Well," said she, "I'll be goin'."

"No, no," said Greene. "What you want to be in such a hurry for? Set down an' we'll talk it over. We might make a trade, after all. If you should ask me what 'twas wise for you to do I should say, sell, a piece o' land like that. You can't eat it nor wear it. If a single woman like you's got a house, that's one thing. But a lot o' land, that's another."

"One o' the boys spoke about it," said Tabitha faintly. "He said lumber's worth a lot nowadays."

"Boys? What boys?" asked Greene ruthlessly. "One o' Neale's boys?"

She nodded.

"Well," said he satirically, "if you're goin' round takin' the word o' boys about your property —"

"Ben's terrible knowin'," she ventured.

"I dunno where ye'll come out. Why, yes, the timber makes it more val'able. 'Course it does. But I wouldn't go to gettin' my ideas up too high."

"That's it," said Tabitha. "That's what I come over to ask you. How much d'you think it's worth?"

Squire Greene's gaze dropped to the floor. He sat there considering, and Tabitha, her blue eyes upon him, eagerly waited. It was his great temptation. He had met others, in buying and selling, and been beaten by them or emerged in a fine bravado, telling himself he had not yielded at all and yet come out triumphant. But this was a bigger question than any he had dealt with for a long time. He knew how much the tall pine trees were worth, and what he was ready to give. But his inner devil kept whispering. At length he got up and went

to the desk in the corner. There he took pencil and paper, and Tabitha understood he was figuring it out. But when he threw down the pencil there were no marks on the page. He had sought only to withdraw into a solitude where the temptation and he could whisper it out together, with no reminder of other expectations from those innocent eyes. He came back to his chair, but stood behind it, his hands gripping the straight back.

"Well," said he, "it might be a matter o' nine hunderd dollars."

Tabitha came out of her seat. Her cheeks were suddenly scarlet.

"My Lord in heaven!" said she. "You don't say. I never thought o' such a thing, never in the world."

"Well," said he harshly, "what do ye say?"

Tabitha drew her silk mantle about her. She was edging toward the door. It might have been that she had forgotten him. She was absorbed in her own thoughts.

"Nine hunderd dollars!" she repeated. "Never did I hear o' such a thing."

Innocently she had the whip-hand: for with all his shrewdness, he could not determine whether she was amazed at the smallness of it or, incredibly, at its bigness.

"Here!" he called. "You can't run off like that in the middle of a trade. What you got to say?"

Tabitha, at the door, turned upon him her dazed and joyous look.

"Oh, I ain't got anything to say," she rejoined happily. "Not to-day, anyways."

"If you ain't satisfied, you can say so," he told her, following her out through the hall. "How do you know but I might go up twenty-five dollars or more? How'm I

goin' to know whether you're satisfied or not, if you don't say so?"

Tabitha, on the front steps, was hoisting her steeple-crowned parasol.

"Oh, I ain't findin' any fault," she announced gaily. "I'll say good-day."

The Squire was done, and yet, he knew, unwittingly. That was the exasperating part of it. How to lay an arresting hand on an intelligence that slipped away when you were about to probe it?

"Look here," he called after her, "you goin' home to tell Tom Neale I offered you nine hunderd dollars?"

"Oh, no," said Tabitha earnestly. "I wouldn't have him know it for the world. That's what I was goin' to beseech of you. Don't you say a word, an' I won't neither."

She went hurrying down the path, almost running, he thought, in his exasperation against her, and he watched the steeple-crowned parasol bobbing along the road. And whether she knew him for the rascal he was he could not decide, long as he debated it, that night and following days.

All the way home Tabitha hummed her little formless song. The world seemed to her a rich place. When she came into the house, Mary Neale, sewing by a front window, looked up at her and smiled. She asked no questions. Tabitha, so far as Mary could manage it, was a free inmate of the house. But she saw the little alien guest was in excellent spirits, and wondered.

"It's proper dusty," said Tabitha, quite gaily as she went up the stairs.

That night, when Hugh was going up to bed, she opened her door a crack and beckoned him.

"Don't you be discouraged," she said, nodding and

smiling mysteriously. "When you want to go, I guess a way'll be found."

Hugh, smiling back at her, but without interest, thought she'd been telling his fortune again by the cards.

It was a long time before Aunt Tab went "abroad" again, in the speech of the place, to make a call. Squire Greene looked for her in vain to complete the trade, and one day, when Thomas and Mary Neale had driven off to Beckenham together, he went over to see her and renew his offer. But though he let the knocker fall with a clang that terrified Tabitha, above there in her chamber, a hand on her heart and her eyes starting, she did not answer, and he went away, hating the duplicity of woman with a fierceness that was like a curse. Tabitha, behind her curtain, watched his back and muttered her relief.

"My soul!" she said. "My soul!"

It was all a haze to her, the desire she had to sell, her fear of Brother Thomas if she did sell, her wonder at the tremendous sum the squire offered her and her sheer physical panic at the squire himself.

VIII

The neighborhoods, little settlements that made up the township of Bromley, were separated by acres of wood and meadow land that fed the fires of the homesteads and their stock. The neighborhoods were much alike, all farming except for the small industrial interests of a sawmill or a blacksmith's forge; but they were different in atmosphere, a little unsympathetic on some points, somewhat jealous, it may be, if one got a bigger road appropriation than another or new maps for the school-house or the repair of a bridge. They were exactly like families, these neighborhoods: they hung together against other townships, in time of stress, but they knew one another's foibles too well to be over civil among themselves. In the upper district, where our two houses stood, most of the people were from what could be called old stock. Somebody of their name had been there for a long course of years. The family might have begun in dignity and ended in the dishonor of acquiescent poverty; but still the name had been carried on. Whatever happiness lies in stability, in opening your eyes to the trees and the sky-line your grandfathers looked their last on, this was theirs abundantly. Besides the Neales and the Brocks and the Greenes there was Sally Wheeler, a spinster near seventy now, oddest, most consistent of New England survivals, who lived alone in her great house, a nobly built Georgian structure, with a man and a maid to work for her. They, like Trueman and Hannah, were

known as "help," but of another stripe. Entirely through their own unspoken choice, responsive to her personal quality, they were outwardly servants in the conventional sense, while Trueman and his sister might have appeared, to an eye that understood not New England, to be perched, though with no discomfort of holding on, upon a higher social plane. The devotion of Sally Wheeler's servitors was unbounded. So was hers to them. She had always made her hired household the warm interest of her life, in a way they never failed to understand. The neighbors even said her "help" grew to look like her after it had been years enough with her, unless indeed she selected them in the beginning for a hook nose and "that kind of chin." Old Henry and his wife, Ann, who preceded the present man and woman, had been so dear to Sally Wheeler that she named the horse and cows for them, and continued to call every other man and woman who worked for her, Henry and Ann. Her old horse, coeval with the departed Henry, was on his last legs now, and it was surmised that, if Sally Wheeler could take him into the spare room and tend him through his failing years, she'd do it.

When she was a girl, it was remembered, Sally Wheeler was very plain; that was due chiefly to her eagle-like profile, well enough for a man, but disconcerting in a woman. But age had softened her face subtly, and her gray hair crowned and shadowed it. She was slender and still erect, and her delicate hands were her real beauty: eloquent hands that played a silent accompaniment to her life. Her race was all fire and revolt, in public matters. They were lawyers, chiefly, of an incendiary sort, ready to cease balancing the scales at any call from large affairs and rush out to cry aloud in the market-place for liberty and right. And she was like them. It was opined

she would have made a great lawyer, for she was entirely fearless in her judgments and bold and fluent in expressing them. She and Larry Greene were great friends. Sometimes she summoned him to come and spend a few days, and the present Henry would be sent after him; or she herself would drive the horse, Henry, over in the swaying chaise, and Larry would throw in his kit and they would go sagging back along the country road. Or again he might suddenly elect to visit her and set off uninvited; but whenever he was there, it was known they sat up till all hours and talked incessantly. Somebody said once they smoked together, but that was never verified. Henry, the man, when probed about it only remarked:

"If I's you, I wouldn't be any more of a fool 'n I could help."

Also there were the Gleasons, a house swarming with children, where there was never quite enough to eat and nobody complained. No mouth ceased smiling because it was so seldom full. These were scatter-brained happy creatures. They welcomed every day with delight, and hardly knew they had got nothing tangible out of it at the close. They were thin, lithe creatures with red hair and limpid blue eyes, and one of them, Griselda, known as Grissie, Ellen Brock's age, had redder hair than the rest, curled so preposterously that she couldn't get a comb through it. And when she told you that, she laughed melodiously. Grissie even laughed at her name, and the names of her brothers and sisters. The romanticism of the family had burst out in names; whenever they found an unusual or mellifluous one they either threw it at a baby or took it out in regretting that those already provided for couldn't be christened anew. Ellen used to be quite mortified at the way Grissie went to school, her waist and skirt inadequately put together and her shoe-strings

pieced out with twine. But Grissie, from a gigantic optimism, laughed all rigors to scorn.

"You needn't worry," she would tell Ellen. "Sometime I'll have as good clo'es as anybody. See 'f I don't."

"I don't know where you're going to get 'em," Ellen would respond, full of a motherly anxiety over the future. But Grissie laughed and swung her dinner-pail. She didn't know either, but she was the one who didn't care.

Old Deacon Mendell who lived "down the road a piece" and, sour as he was to the eye, had the knack of raising the best vegetables and fruit Bromley had ever seen, frowned at the antics of Grissie and her clan. They lived next him and their godless example irked him. He could always hire a little Gleason or two to pick peas or weed onions; but it hurt the part of his brain that was connected with his pocket to think how foolishly they spent their wage. It was a great temptation to underpay them, they so joyously accepted whatever you gave, and he couldn't believe the Lord wanted them to scatter his ten-cent pieces right and left in chocolate creams and hair ribbons. Even their father had a trick of irritating him: for he was likely to sit all day, in the busiest season, smoking luxuriously, and one year his potatoes were not dug until the frost. It was a trick of humorous destiny that settled Deacon Mendell beside people who could so jar his inherited traditions by the consistent acts of their daily lives. But he went his way, a little thin, dark man, fiercely clean and aggressively pious, black with his Sabbath gloom, and they went caroling on theirs. He sometimes told his wife, who was as God-fearing as he, only with a more apprehensive glance about her, as one who suspected punishment lurking under flowers, that he sometimes thought the Gleasons didn't know where they were going. And that was it. That was the beauty of

the Gleasons. They didn't know, and it never came to them to inquire.

The children of the neighborhood — all but Ellen — went to school in a little white school-house in a mosquito-haunted spot by Long Pond. Nobody knew why the school-house had been set there, though generation upon generation of mothers went white and speechless, in term time, when they saw a man driving fast from that direction: since it was well known the pond was bottomless. For the children, Long Pond had the fascination of compelling destiny. All their games seemed to take them to it. But no one was ever drowned there, and noné ceased to prophesy the time would come. When they grew beyond elementary training, they went, the few who wanted to pursue learning to vague outer bounds, to the Academy at Beckenham, spoken of disparagingly by the farmers roundabout because the atmosphere was austere and the curriculum classical. They wondered, and rightly, with the question of industrial education filling the weekly paper, how you were going to buy and sell the better and raise bumper crops by studying Greek and Latin and the history of the world a thousand years ago. But even they had an unreasoned pride in the graduates, who were manifestly different from illiterate youth; and it was felt that the child who didn't have ambition for at least a year of the Academy was not on the right road.

When Hugh and Ben and Ellen began their academical course it seemed to their elders that it very nearly turned their heads. They brightened under it and talked together of esoteric things, and a new intimacy sprang up between them, from community of interest and chiefly from their walking the five miles morning and night. Grissie also walked the daily stretch, walked it and raced it like a bacchante, her red hair standing out in a sun-

bright cloud and her eyes flaming. She was the cleverest of them, in a wild, erratic fashion, biting into a book when she liked it and sucking it dry and then smilingly impenetrable for weeks to the simplest kind of fact. Hugh and Ellen were the students. They dreamed over books and dug their way into them and wondered at the amazing things so freely told. But Ben took it all like a game. He had only, his mother told Aunt Tab, to read over his lesson and he had it by heart. But when he had it, it was only a lesson, something that might be required of him for examination and not for actualities. This Mary Neale and Aunt Tab vaguely guessed: for while they exulted over his touch-and-go intelligence, they smiled at each other, remembering Hugh. He, they told each other, was not so quick, but they guessed he knew full as much in the end.

School began early this year, a hot day in the first week of September. Hugh had waited for it in an agony of impatience, always with that dull pain because Ellen would not speak. The first morning of starting out together in the old companionship must, he knew, break the dreadful spell. It would be, his heart declared, always running ahead of his tongue or pen, like the breaking of a drought and the coming of rains. He could feel the cooling of the drops on his forehead and his lips. The night before, he piled his books and bound them in a strap, and in the morning he was combed and scrubbed an hour before the time of starting and got into nervous shivers for fear he should be late: this at the last minute when his father sent him to bring in wood. Grissie came from "down the road," her books in an untidy bundle under her arm, and called, in a shrill salute. Then she went on to summon Ellen, and when Ben and Hugh followed they overtook the two girls walking fast along the

dusty road. Ellen wore her last year's dress of blue gingham, but her collars and cuffs were exquisitely washed and ironed. She looked like the modest little sister of a benevolent order. But Grissie outwantoned the flaming day in her bright purple dress and a rose-pink ribbon at her neck. You couldn't say whether she was striking or simply outrageous. She was only inexplicably exciting and made you, if you were her age, want to do things as wild as she looked. She had instantly that effect on Ben. So she might have had on Hugh if he had seen her at all; but his eyes were on Ellen, the good little sister who looked too mild and equable to keep up a cruel feud to punish a boy. Ben ran up behind Grissie and first twitched her hair and then the rose-pink ribbon, and snatched her books away from her. It was all in the way of chivalrous attention. He was merely offering to carry the books as a perfect gentleman ought, and Grissie understood. She received his tribute with an answering cuff and then relinquished the books blithely, and they went on together, hooting and laughing. Hugh came up to Ellen and laid a hand on her load. He wanted to carry it. He always had done it. But Ellen, not as if she knew he had touched the books with that inviting gesture, but as if their position irked her, shifted them to the other arm, and, without looking at him, walked quietly along. His heart fell in his breast, like a stone. It was going to last, then, her dreadful silence. Nothing would be of any use after this, not his fiddle or anything he could learn at the Academy or all the money he might make to take his mother away from his father and Ellen from her poverty. They walked on together in silence, his heavy heart harder and harder to carry, through the little town and up the steps of the Academy, among the greeting groups. But there was one bitterest pang to come. As

they entered the door, Grissie left Ben and fell back to Ellen's side. She spoke with caution, but Hugh caught the words:

"Say, you and Hugh mad? Don't you speak?"

He didn't know whether it was an added pain or a slight comfort that Ellen did not answer. She walked to her desk as if she had not heard.

And every day it was the same. Hugh went beside her with the step of a soldier forced to march and the desperate look of the soldier who knows himself foredoomed. Every morning he woke with the heaviness that lies waiting from a lasting misery, and whatever he did, even when he went to Larry's for his lesson, the nausea of grief was in the inmost part of him. Larry began to watch him, and decided, before the trees were bare, that he was fretting over his fiddle, and one night he said to him, when Hugh came in at the early dusk to ask a question about fingering:

"Why don't you run away and have it over?"

"Run away?" repeated Hugh. He looked at Larry in a brief surprise. "I don't want to run away."

How could he run away and leave the question of his life unanswered, leave a silent Ellen too angry even to say good-by?

"Well!" said Larry. That was evidently not the way out. What other way was there? "I wish you'd go into Ardelia's," he said, at random, "and ask Ellen to fetch my bread."

Hugh had risen to go. He stood there holding the top rail of a straight-backed chair and Larry saw his knuckles whiten and, needing to know the whole, ruthlessly lifted his gaze to the boy's face. It was as pale as if all the blood in him had been summoned to keep up his sick heart. Yet Hugh answered without emotion.

"I can't," said he.

Then Larry knew, and answered cheerfully:

"All right. I'll go up myself, this evening."

Larry did go up, and, entering the yard softly, looked in at the window. Often, he knew, Ardelia left Ellen at her books and went neighboring at the Gleasons'. If Ardelia were here, he could not ask his question. Ellen was alone, sitting at the table, a pile of books before her and her pretty forehead tied into a studious frown. Larry called to her and then walked in, and she took his coming as a delightful happening and drew up another chair and told him to begin at once to scan her Latin. So he did, and they fell together into the rhythm, and sang it together and were most particularly happy, and Ellen's cheeks grew red with the fun of it and, for the minute, she forgot her father was not there. David hadn't known how to scan, but she always felt everything used to be easy when he was in the room, and this night, what with the snags she tripped over in her task, she had been minding his loss overwhelmingly. Larry raced through their pretty game in a scamper, for fear Ardelia would come before he did the deed he came for, and when they ended, he shut the book and asked:

"Ellen, don't you speak to Hugh?"

All the enchanting shine and life faded out of her face, and she answered with dignity, yet, Larry saw, sullenly:

"No."

"Why not?" asked Larry.

And Ellen was as silent as she had been to Hugh. Larry leaned back in his chair and, while he looked at her, he drummed on the table with his hand, a distinctively handsome hand that played the violin.

"Now," said he, "my lady, you needn't get sulky with

me, because if you do, I'll take you up in my two hands and throw you over the moon."

Ellen didn't look at him; but he saw a little quirk of a smile trying to untie the muscles about her mouth, and he felt he had her. Besides, Ellen knew she was quite safe with him. He wouldn't touch her high mightiness with his two beautiful violin-playing hands.

"Ellen," said Larry, drumming on the table, "you are a little prig."

"What's a prig?" asked Ellen.

"It's something with two feet and two hands and nice brown hair tied with a red ribbon." (Ellen had stopped doing up her hair when school began, because the girls laughed at her.) "It's something that gets mad and self-righteous if a boy wants to kiss 'em —"

"I hate such things," flashed Ellen.

"Well, but, my child," said Larry, gently, just as her father would have spoken, and Ellen thought of that, and choked, "if it's a decent chap like Hugh it only means your hair is so pretty and your eyes are so bright and you're such a dear — like a kitten, you know, or one of Smilie's puppies — he can't help it."

Ellen did, in spite of her anchorite heart, like to be thought pretty, and was sure she never could be because her clothes were so plain.

"You'd like to kiss Smilie's puppies. I've seen you do it. How would you like if it Smilie and I wouldn't speak to you?"

"I suppose you want me to act like —" Here she stopped, not intending to be hateful about another girl. But he knew.

"Like Grissie Gleason?" he asked. "No, I don't want you to be like her. Though there's no harm in Grissie. She's a butterfly in the sun. She'd go fluttering round

with any kind of a butterfly, if his wings were pretty. But that wouldn't mean she was a bad Grissie. Don't you get to despising people, Ellen, because they're not so good as you."

Ellen was looking at him woefully, and startled in a way that made him ask her:

"What is it now?"

"If it's all — like that," faltered Ellen, "it's dreadful."

He saw what he had done. He had opened to her a way of the world. Why hadn't she the kind of mother, his mind despairingly lamented, that would take her hand firmly and lead her out of this ambuscade of ignorance? He went at it with a run. "Ellen," he said, "first and last there's no such glorious and dreadful thing as falling in love, and wanting to marry, or maybe not marrying because sometimes you don't love the right one. But there's a side of us that makes us go uneasily seeking about after our mate, if we haven't got one, and we make awful fools of ourselves. Boys and girls don't know they want a mate — mostly — but they do silly things. Like Grissie. And mostly the things aren't big enough to despise them for and stop speaking. Sometimes, I know, they are and then you have to knock 'em down with a cordwood stick and never, never speak to 'em till they're well punished. But Hugh, Ellen! Hugh's only a big, blundering boy, and you're behaving like the deuce."

Ellen wasn't thinking of Hugh. Her brows were heavy with an unhappy fear. It looked to him like jealousy.

"You said everybody goes round hunting after his mate," she said. "I suppose you mean men. You haven't any mate."

"Good God, no!" said Larry. He would lay that jealous imp to rest. "I don't want any mate. I just

want your mother to make my bread and you to fetch it to me. But I did want a mate, Ellen, once, and if I told you how old and fat she is now and how I love one of Smilie's wags better than the lost dream of her, you'd be terribly shocked at the whole business. But you speak to Hugh. He's worked out his sentence, don't you see? Tell him he's discharged."

He got up and took his cap, but Ellen did not stir. Her eyes followed him to the door.

"I suppose he's been tattling to you," she said, but not until his hand was on the latch.

"No, you don't suppose any such thing," said Larry. "You know he hasn't. I saw him that day in the woods, and he didn't even want to kiss you, poor devil! and he wasn't fighting you. He was fighting himself and nature. That's the old girl he was fighting, and you weren't in it at all, little Miss Vanity — or only so far as you were nature's understudy. Good-night."

He shut the door and went whistling along the path to the gate, and Ellen sat as still as the still house about her, and thought. And first she was angry with him because he could abuse her so and make nothing of it, and then she soberly concluded life was a difficult business and that it had got to include many strange things, if Larry said so. And when Ardelia came home, flushed with her walk and the good cheer at the Gleasons', Ellen looked at her in a new wonder. This, her mind told her, was her father's mate. He had gone seeking round and he had found Ardelia. She got up and packed her books together and hurried to bed, and there Ardelia found her curled up like a little creature in a cocoon, the clothes tucked in at her back and her arms tight about her body. Ardelia put a hand on the rigid arms and gently tried to loose them.

"You better get straightened out," said she, "'fore you go to sleep."

But Ellen only moaned a little and the tense body kept its rigor. Usually they talked awhile before they slept, but to-night she breathed regularly and did not answer, and Ardelia concluded she had studied too late, and went placidly off into her own estate of dreams. Ellen, too, dreamed that night. It was the first of what she learned to call love dreams, and they shook her with a terror and expectation new to her. Always they were of an unknown person, a man, young and inexplicably comprehending and tender, somebody she had waited for a long time and who came at last. He was kind, like her father and Larry, and he knew at once what you meant, even if you hadn't time to say it, and there was a boundless relief because he had come. And always before they had a chance to say any of the things they had to say to each other, she woke. And she longed for and yet dreaded the night that might bring him again.

The next morning she waited until the boys and Grissie had got by her gate, calling as they went and lingering for her; and when she came out Ben and Grissie, seeing her, went on, at their old game of cheerful quarreling; but Hugh dropped behind, because, though she would not speak to him, it was a part of his dogged acceptance to fall into step with her and march it through.

"Hullo, Hugh," said Ellen.

Hugh stopped short and stood there staring down at his feet and Ellen, looking at him for the first time in the weeks of his punishment, thought with surprise only, and no compunction, that he looked sick and strange. But she felt as if she had only just come from her dream about the beautiful person who made everything well, and she meant to be good for the sake of him.

"Hullo, Hugh," she said again.

"Hullo," said Hugh.

He looked up now, and she saw how bright his eyes were, and that, for an instant, his face quivered. He put out his hand for her books and she gave them to him, and they went on, Hugh now overwhelmed, with a rush, by all the things he had ceased remembering in the arid waste of his silent marches at her side. It was a cold day, but he remembered spring with the trembling of leaves and the sound of the risen brooks. There was music everywhere — not birds, but just music — and the feel of light and motion. He thought he should burst with it all until he could turn the sweeping flood of it into his violin. But Ellen, walking lightly with him, thought only of the unknown stranger.

That afternoon, Neale, who had business in town, came to the Academy for the boys. Ben ran out, calling over his shoulder to Grissie, to "Come along." Then Hugh appeared, and Ellen, and he, remembering his father's anger against the "Brock girl," forestalled its completest triumph.

"I'll walk, father. I've got to put something on the board."

It was true, though he could have done it in the morning, as he had meant. Neale drove away without a look at him or at Ellen, and she followed, rather proudly, indeed, her head up and her feet stepping delicately. She knew why Thomas Neale hated her: it was because she was in the way of his buying the little house. When she had got beyond the town limit, Hugh overtook her, walking fast and showing, in the redness of his face and his quickened breath, that he had only just been running. So they sauntered home together in a decent peace, talking of classes and promotions. Ellen was rather glad

hostilities were ended, it was so silly to keep wondering if she were going to meet him, and preparing to look away; but Hugh was in a heaven of delight. He left her at her gate, with the old call, "To-morrow!" and ran on home where he found his mother in the kitchen, at the stove, watching the apple sauce that, made out of early fruit, exquisitely scented the air.

"Well," said Mary, looking up and feeling her heart quicken because he looked so happy, in a natural, boyish way, "how's it begin?"

Hugh went up to her and looked in her face, his seeking eyes, his fair young color and the sweet youngness of him a charm to her.

"Mum," said he, "don't you hate to have him act so?"

"Who?" asked Mary perversely, though she knew.

"Father. He won't ask Ellen to ride, he's so set against her. It didn't make so much difference to-night; but if 'twas a pouring rain — it makes me mad as thunder."

"Yes," said Mary, adding, before she could recall herself to her defensive dignity, "I'll see to it."

And then Ben came clamoring in for supper, and no more was said.

That night when Mary lay watching her husband throwing off his clothes in the pelting haste that made his bedward journey a wild erratic progress toward the sleep he seemed to assault and drag toward him, in the impatient recognition that it was a means toward "a hard day to-morrow," she spoke, from inward apprehension but an outer calm.

"Thomas, we shall have to remember to ask Ellen and Grissie to ride whenever we fetch the boys or carry them. It's a long walk for 'em, little girls so."

"They ain't so terrible little," returned Neale gruffly. "The Brock girl ain't."

"She's been kept kind o' babyish," said Mary softly. Now she was praying for him, in an inarticulate way she had: always that he might be softened, that he might "come to a realizing sense." "Same's we've kept our boys. I guess we don't any of us want our boys and girls to grow up. I've wished a good many times," she added, this in no wily desire to move him, but as she sought wistfully for kind intimacies of talk, "we'd had a little girl of our own."

Neale did not answer this. She was not sure he heard. And in an amazingly short time he was off, with the sleep he had assaulted and bound on his saddle-bow, for the renewing mystery that should fit him for his hard day tomorrow.

But the next time he went to Beckenham for the boys — the afternoon of a soaking rain — she watched the little house, when it was time for them to come, and saw the carryall stop and Ellen alight from it and run in. Mary Neale had one of her moments of relief, a grave sense of victory. But victory never did her any good in charging the next hill: it had to be gained in such a dusk of silence that she could never judge which of her arguments or pleas had won, or having gained a step, whether she could expect to hold it.

And no one knew, not even Neale, whether her plea had moved him or whether Ellen, because she owned a share of the little house, must be at least tacitly conciliated.

IX

There were long periods in the neighborhood life, as there are in the lives of men and women, when nothing happened. The things that befell the young creatures, their quick growth, wonderful to mothers and source of half sheepish diffidence to themselves, went on bravely, and in the time before graduation day the two boys and two girls of the upper neighborhood had waxed into young men and women. They were graduating together, Ben and Grissie catching up with the two elders because they were so much cleverer at memorizing, and on a day in June the four sat on the platform with the rest of the seniors, the girls white-clad and the boys in correct attire, and read little essays and received their diplomas. Grissie was, the neighbors said that day, a sight. They could not make up their minds whether she was a thing of pride or horror. Ellen wore a plain white muslin with a blue girdle that had cost her painstaking anxiety to fashion; but Grissie had a dress covered with little ruffles from hem to belt. The sleeves were ruffled and the waist was barred and blocked by "insets" and was, Mary Neale thought, outrageously low, disclosing the thin neck that must have had, in its lightly covered bony structure, a beauty of its own, because, it was evident, you couldn't help looking at it. Ellen's neck was all a smooth fairness of satin skin; but somehow nobody regarded it more than an admiring minute. Mary Neale, sitting in the front row while the essays were read, pondered anxiously, and would have invoked a charm to keep her boys away from

Grissie: from Ellen, too, perhaps. She had deep in her a shy mother jealousy that made her see the maidens her boys were to love, far off, impalpable as mist. The boys wouldn't, she hoped, be thinking about these things yet awhile. Thomas Neale was not there. Mary had never doubted he would go, and did not bring the subject up to him that morning; but at the noon dinner, which they ate alone because the boys had gone to trim the hall, she said to him:

"I've laid out your clo'es on the best room bed."

"Clo'es?" asked Thomas, looking up briefly from the business of his dinner. He had changed more than his wife in these last years, toughened, dried and grown stiffer in the legs.

"Yes," she said, "for the exercises."

Neale ate on for a moment, apparently while he made up his mind.

"I ain't goin' over there," he said. "I've got too much to do."

Mary set down her cup and looked at him with a full-hearted trouble he had hardly seen in her since their early married days when she had not, he used to think, learned to control herself. Slowly her eyes suffused. The tears did not spring as quickly as in those old days.

"O Thomas!" she said. Then, "I'm afraid the boys will be terribly disappointed."

He was surprised. It seemed to him a foolish thing to say. He was entirely just in his idea of family affection. He expected no more softness than he gave.

"I'll harness up for you," he said. "What time you want to start?"

"A little after two," said Mary, with dignity. "I've invited Grissie and Ellen." He could ignore the greatness of the occasion, and she felt outraged in her mother-

love. "His two sons!" she thought swellingly. "The only ones he's got."

That June day was a beauty, full of divine intentions. The world had never looked to Larry Greene, on his way to the hall, more overwhelming in its radiant fecundity. He was not accustomed to town sociabilities; but this graduation was the great day of Ellen and Hugh and he concluded, with a wry face over it, that decency bade him be there. At the hall he sat in a dream of youth and age and the world made of them both, and the whirling stars and years, and gave little heed to the essays and their grave platitudes. Hugh's poem he had heard before: a shy fledgling of a thing, yet indubitably winged. Really the poem came singing down to Hugh the day when the rigors of Ellen's silence miraculously thawed, and the boy heard music, and, through the airs of autumn, felt the spring. To him, it was a queer oddment of a thing to own, something he had found, a floating wonder, or a miraculously green sprout in a barren land; but since the master, who had noted the surprising ease of his mind at translation, had asked him to do something rhythmical, he turned it in. Larry wondered what the fathers and mothers thought of this rapt, unhindered song. He looked about him, as Hugh read, and saw no manner of response on the listening faces: only on Mary Neale's, anxiety and wonder.

When Grissie stood up, topped by her flame of hair, to deliver the valedictory, he woke again, and smiled a little to himself over the force of her, the sheer magnetic power of sex. On the way out of the hall he found himself arm to arm with his sister-in-law, the squire's wife, whom he had once broken his heart about and who was woven into all his memories of the Junes when he, too, was young. They exchanged a pleasant word, and he smiled on her, at

things she could not know. There she was in the mid-afternoon of life, tightly corseted and bound into a gay summer silk, a rotund soft fatness with her blonde skin a network of red and her fine pale hair thin at the top. She was the image, he thought, of her own mother when he was walking the country woods and fields entranced by that girl-vision, that angelic wonder. It seemed to him now that there never had been any girl. The illusion of her was something nature had conjured up out of her own needs, to make the world last the longer. He wondered what his frame of mind would have been to-day if he had married the lovely wraith and it had developed into this soft rotundity. Would his eyes have been holden because the change crept on her, day by day, as it was creeping over him, and would he have thought it inevitable that an earth of sated emotion should have been born out of that heaven of desire? She was looking down at him. She was a little taller than he, and that, in the old days, had been a vexation.

"Well, Larry," she said, in her voice of hard yet well-intentioned smoothness, "you don't get out very often, do you? I don't know's ever I see you to the hall before."

"No," said Larry, "I never come, except for town meeting."

"Well," said she, "this 's a real pretty occasion. They looked well an' they done well. D'you ever see such a little fly-by-night as that Grissie Gleason?"

"Very pretty," said Larry. But he was tempted to continue: "You were more or less like her once. She is born to move the hearts of men, and so were you, if you had but realized it. Did you realize it at the time and forget it the instant you came into your dower of the big house and the grand old furniture?"

But none of this was to be said to Clara, who would not

understand. He walked soberly beside her and went to the neighboring street where her horse was hitched, and helped her into the wagon.

"You ride along too," said she. "I'm goin' straight home an' I'll give you a lift fur as the cross-road."

No, Larry told her soberly, he had some errands to do. But after he had watched her broad back down the street he walked after and took a cut home across the fields. It was not shorter, but it saved him the trouble of nodding to kindly neighbors and refusing the offer to "ride."

That night the graduates and their guests danced in the town hall, and Grissie led the rout, like a bacchante. Mothers, looking on, said they never saw such a sight; but boys followed her five deep, to beg dances, and some of the fathers sitting along the wall, watching the romp, exchanged looks of terrified admiration and shook their heads. Hugh was pale with the thought that the moment had come, after long resolve, and he was to ask Ellen to waltz. He had got the mastery of his body now. There were no more uncouth gestures of the young animal. He was serious and silent, and he had the beauty of youth. Ben, too, had it, but he was more lithe and weedy, not so strongly knit, and his yellow hair was a girlish crown. Ellen had been dancing before Hugh got his courage to ask her. It seemed to him symbolic in a way; if she refused him that night, she would deny him everything that was to come after. Two other boys were before him on the way to her, but he strode past them and spoke her name. He did not know whether he really asked her or not; but she nodded and he was bearing her away. They danced silently and then, near the back door of the hall, Ellen's soft mass of hair shook loose, and she said she must leave him and go pin it up. Hugh had found his courage. He dared withstand her.

"No," he said. "Come out here under the old tree. You don't need a glass."

She yielded, and a curious triumph came upon him. He had made her do even so small a thing, and he felt as if the power had shifted and he could make her do more.

"There's the seat under the old elm," he said. "You sit there while you fix it."

This was a grassed enclosure behind the hall, surrounded by a high fence and fringing lilac bushes. Here the May Festival was held and, in the autumn, the live stock of the Fair dug the turf into indescribable oddities. Ellen sat down on the circular bench about the old tree and painstakingly, with charming motions he could follow in the moonlight, pinned up her hair. He stood a moment. He was almost afraid that, if he sat beside her, the old never-forgotten silence would envelop them. But presently he did sit, and said, assuming the ease he did not feel:

"Hot in there. I'm glad to sit down a minute."

"Yes," said Ellen absently.

She was evidently not thinking of him, and his boldness rose. He felt it necessary to bring her back to him.

"Ellen," he said, "I'm going away."

Ellen laughed a little, not unpleasantly, but as if she found him young and not significant.

"You're always saying that," she told him.

He felt the sudden heat in his face.

"I haven't said it to you," he reminded her, "not for years and years."

"You have to Larry Greene."

"Does he tell you what I say to him?"

"No. I've heard you talking."

"Well," said Hugh boldly, "what do you think about it?"

Ellen had put her white scarf carefully about her shoulders as she leaned against the tree. She could not let the rough bark touch the fine fabric of her precious dress. It had cost her too much in money and forethought to be lightly used. She suddenly realized that she was happy. The moonlight and the sound of music from the hall were entrancing to her. The light breeze lifted the soft hair on her forehead, and she gave a little shiver, not of coolness but delight.

"You cold?" Hugh asked her.

"No," said Ellen dreamily. "I'm having a good time, that's all. This is the first real party I ever went to."

"You dance like a bird." He remembered he had not seen her dance before. "How'd you learn, Ellen?"

"The girls taught me, noons and recess," said Ellen. "This night was coming and I knew I'd want to dance."

She knew the night was coming. So she, like him, had had prescience of this moment. When he spoke now, his voice was strange to him. He wanted to tell her things; but he was desperately afraid of frightening her away.

"Maybe you don't think I can fiddle very well."

"You don't fiddle so well as Larry Greene," said Ellen. "And he taught himself. If you could fiddle better 'n anybody, I should think 'twould pay you to go to Europe and study; but Larry Greene says himself you never'll do more than give lessons."

"Then he does talk me over," said Hugh.

"No. He told you that to your face. I heard him when I was washing the dishes."

"It makes no difference," said Hugh. "I'm going abroad."

Ellen turned to him, her eyes wide in honest wonder.

"Why, Hugh," said she, "where you going to get the money?"

"It don't make any difference where I get it. I'm going.

"Besides," said Ellen, "your father needs you on the farm. You've got twice the strength Ben has. Your mother said so, one day when she's in."

Hugh said nothing, but set his jaw. She moved slightly and he thought she was going and caught at a word to stay her.

"What you going to do yourself?"

"I'm going to be a stenographer," said Ellen. "Grissie is, too. We've been working together, and we do pretty well. And we've been practicing on that old typewriter the clerk in the bank gave her. Hugh!"

"Well," said Hugh.

"What makes everybody like Grissie so?"

"They don't," said Hugh. "Not any way you'd call liking."

"They do, too," said Ellen. She had wakened into an intense animation. "Everybody's crazy about her. The boys want to do things for her, and whatever she does is right."

"I don't want to do things for her," said Hugh. "I shouldn't care if I never set eyes on her again."

"Oh, well," said Ellen impatiently, "I didn't mean you. I meant the other boys. You don't count."

Why didn't he count? He could never make her out. Her old cruelty smote him with a new misery.

"Maybe I don't count," he said, at last, "not with you. But you'd ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ellen Brock, if I don't. Because you know what the reason is, and I do, too."

Ellen was silent so long that he wondered if again she was beginning not to speak and realized that he never could bear that silence now. When she did speak it was

in a small, almost a frightened voice. Yet it was curious, too.

"What is the reason?"

"It's because you know I'm in love with you," said Hugh. "And you know I've made up my mind to marry you, and you know I'd die in my tracks to get you, and there's no way you could treat me that would stop my wanting you."

Again she was silent, and then she struck her small fist on the bench so hard that he said involuntarily:

"Oh, don't!"

He knew she had hurt the little hand.

"Oh, how I hate it," said Ellen fiercely. "I hate it all. And I hate anybody that makes me think of it."

"What?" said Hugh.

"Such things," she answered sulkily. "I thought I was going to have a nice time to-night, and now you —" She stopped, because, he knew, if she went on it would be half crying.

And suddenly, out of the passion of his love for her, he leaped at an understanding of her like Larry Greene's. She was a little girl still, and he was troubling her with love before her time. He would have liked to comfort her in his own way, with soft words and dearnesses; but he did not dare.

"Don't you mind," he said. He even laughed a little, to reassure her. "I know how you feel. You're not like Grissie. Lots of girls aren't. Everybody's in such an awful hurry to have girls grow up. I don't see what they're in such a rush for."

"I want to grow up," said Ellen, still in that passion of fierceness, though now it seemed to him she was mentally a little less aloof from him. "But I hate — such things."

Hugh felt for the first time as if he held the key to her. Yet he had not heard of the stranger she dreamed about.

"You don't have to think about 'em," he said. "Sometime you'll grow up. And you'll be married. But that's a long ways off."

What she would have said, he wondered afterward, but he was quite sure that, if she had raged at him or scorned him, he could, by the force of his new knowledge of her, have calmed her and taken up their undisturbed friendliness a good pace further on. But the forces of the blindly working universe were against him: two figures ran out from the hall, one of them in white, and a light laugh rippled. They knew the laugh. Nobody but Grissie trilled that inexhaustible way.

"Hold on," called the boy who raced after her. "Do you want to break a fellow's neck?"

The voice, too, they knew. This was Ben. Grissie turned and in the moonlight they saw her run into his outstretched arms. To Ellen's angry eyes it seemed as if she doubled, not to escape but to be caught the sooner. And for an instant they stood there clasped while they kissed thirstily, and then Grissie's light laugh again chimed like silver bells. She was listening.

"Somebody's there," they heard her say. "Under the old elm."

And hand in hand the two went pelting back to the hall. And again she laughed and both the listeners knew, hating her for their different reasons, that she was not timorous of being caught. She was glad. Her rioting passion was as fearless and shameless as the earth's. Ellen got to her feet, and stood there a moment, trembling. Hugh beside her was all an agony of pity, because her one gay night was being spoiled.

"Ellen," he said. "Ellen."

"No, no," she said. "Don't talk any more. I hate it, I tell you. I hate it all."

But his own despair warned him if he lost her now he should never get near enough again to make himself believed. This was his tragedy, too, as well as hers, poor little nun, vowed to virginity.

"Ellen," he said, "you stop. You listen to me. Everybody's not like that. Didn't I tell you?"

"I asked you what made them all run after her," she said passionately. "And that's the answer. Oh, how can they!"

"Everybody's not like that," repeated Hugh doggedly, holding to his poor thread of suasion. "You ask —" he was about to say "your mother" and the picture of foolish Ardelia bridling to work her small will, took him aback, and he ended,—"you ask my mother. We don't need to talk about such things — not that way — not ever, Ellen. And when you grow up you'll be just like my mother. But I want you to dance some more. O Ellen, come along. We never went to a dance together before. And it's our last day, and if you cry we're going to lose it all."

He sounded like a charming boy pleading for something, not a young man who wanted to court and marry. She began to cry softly and then, so strange it was that he never, remembering it, could understand it at all — she whose girl heart had been torn by the sharpness of the knowledge of love, leaned upon his shoulder, and Hugh wiped her tears away. And all the time he kept his cheek pressed on her hair, and he crooned to her in a foolish, formless rhythm his mother had used to him long ago. Ellen, it seemed, hardly knew his shoulder was more than a convenient resting place. Really, as she leaned there, she was thinking of the stranger who

would understand. She came to her demure self and straightened, and again arranged her hair.

"I don't know's I can go in to the light," she said tremulously. "My face is all creased."

"Wait a minute and let it cool off. Here's a nice breeze," said Hugh. He was wildly happy. Somehow he had conquered the situation, and that was better than the kisses and promises of his dreams. For he, too, dreamed, and his dreams came by day as well as night. "You dance with me right through now, and nobody'll notice us. It's 'most time for supper, too. Don't you hope there'll be chocolate ice cream?"

"I never ate any ice cream," said Ellen, with a little sobbing breath, and Hugh's heart contracted in his pity for her. Poor little soul, with no pleasures, and her inborn fear of life! They went in and began dancing at the threshold, so that nobody had a chance to speak to her. Hugh danced with a light gayety that drew her with him into a kind of exhilaration that was strange to her. Grissie was dancing with Ben, and with such abandon that her ruffled skirts swirled about her like little foaming waves of the sea. Her cheeks were scarlet and her eyes shone like blue fire. When Hugh and Ellen passed her, Ellen drooped a little and her step faltered, as if life went out of her; but Hugh whispered to her:

"Let's stop over there, so we can go down to supper first. I know it's chocolate."

X

That night Mary Neale sent Trueman to Beckenham with the carryall, to take home the dancers. Thomas had gone to bed early, after cautions to Trueman not to wait if they weren't ready, but send into the hall and summon them. Trueman looked at Mrs. Neale with a slow relaxing of the face that was not quite a smile but promised he would do nothing so manifestly absurd. As he finished harnessing, a figure appeared noiselessly beside him: Aunt Tab, bareheaded, a light shawl about her shoulders.

"I guess I'll ride along, too," she said.

This was her way of celebrating graduation. Her heart was tumultuous with the thought of the music and dancing and young creatures at the beginning of the wonder of life. But she could not join the medley by daylight. The night was her safe and chosen time, perhaps because Brother Thomas went to bed so early. So she and Trueman drove to the hall, in a silence broken only once by a remark about the moon, and he drew up at the curb, and there they sat listening to the dance music, each uplifted by it and the sense of sharing unproven gayeties. Aunt Tab went off into a dream of Godey's Magazine ladies at Saratoga, and almost felt herself one of them; and when the assembly was over and the crowd came chattering out, she faltered back into her old meager place. The boys knew the carryall was to be there and came straight to it, Ben and Grissie "locked in," Aunt Tab noticed, with admiring delight, but Ellen straight and still and a little aloof. No one, Tabitha noted jealously,

walked with Hugh. Aunt Tab stepped out to the pavement. In her eager humility and her desire to let the young things devour this night to the full, she was giving them their choice of seats. Grissie, who hardly saw her, stepped lightly in; but Ellen retreated. Her fastidious mind saw them packed into the two seats, Ben perhaps holding Grissie's hand or with his arm about her.

"I'll walk," she said, and was instantly gone into the moonlighted dusk.

"The idea!" Grissie called after her. "Walk home at one o'clock in the morning when you can ride just as well!"

"I'll walk, too," said Hugh briefly to Trueman, who nodded, helped in Aunt Tab and then took his place.

There were several long minutes before Hugh overtook Ellen. He suspected her of running to escape him, and he dared not run after her: he was under his old fear of scaring her shy spirit. Loping noiselessly along, he saw her at last ahead, and called to her gaily:

"Hold on. Wait a second."

And now he knew she would be too proud to run, and presently he overtook her.

"D'you bring your books home yesterday?"

"No," said Ellen.

"I didn't either. I suppose Ben or I'll have to go over to-morrow and get 'em. We'll get yours, too."

"Oh!" said Ellen, suddenly breathless. "They're all coming."

"Who?"

"The wagons. All the folks. They'll overtake us."

In the tremor of her shyness, she was seeing how odd it would look to choose to walk with him.

"Hop over the wall here," said he. "We'll stand still a minute behind the cedars. Then we can go along."

She ran over the wall lightly as a wave and he followed her. They stood there in the darkness of the cedars, and the singing, laughing wagon-loads went by. Hugh was wondering over his luck. Every slightest circumstance was pushing them into an intimate isolation. Somehow they two were, in little ways, against the world.

"There," said he, when the road was quiet again, "now we can go along in peace."

Ellen stepped soberly back over the wall; he did not offer to help her, and they walked on, talking absorbedly. To Hugh the night was enchanted. He thought of the beauties of it in the poetry he loved, of nightingales he had heard in Keats and the sound of the sea. But all he dared say to ease his tenderness was, when they were nearing home:

"I guess you're pretty tired."

"No," said Ellen. Her voice sounded happy. "I'm not tired. It's been a nice time — after all."

Ardelia was at the gate, peering into the obscurity.

"I was worried to death," she said, "when the carryall went by without stoppin'. Mis' Neale told me there'd be a place for you. Why under the sun didn't you ride?"

"Oh, I thought I wouldn't," said Ellen lightly. "Good-night, Hugh."

"We didn't either of us care much about being cooped up in the carryall, a night like this," he said, lightly in his turn. "Good-night. I'll fetch your books to-morrow."

He went along the road, his face turned to the heavens where joy was at last being spun for him. They had been alone that one evening. She had turned to him in her strange girlish miseries and, little as he understood, he had helped her bear them.

He expected to find the back door unlatched and to go

up quietly to bed. But on the top step stood his father in shirt and trousers, waiting.

"Where've you been?" asked Thomas Neale, in the contained voice of his type of just and reasonable reproof. Hugh stopped at the foot of the steps and looked up at him. His father's position gave him an added height; but it ran through Hugh's mind, noting it, that, man for man, they were well matched. Or, indeed, he was an inch the taller. It had been a long time since his father had called him to account, and he answered in some slight wonder:

"Why, you know where I've been. I've been to the Academy dance."

"When I ask you anything, don't tell me I know," said Thomas Neale, in a definite exasperation he was eager to seize upon to cover his actual rage. "Your mother sent the team over for you to ride home. Ben got home an hour ago. Where've you been?"

"I walked," said Hugh.

"Yes. I've been watchin' the light over in Delia Brock's window. She's been sittin' up. D'you have that Brock girl with you?"

Hugh stood looking at his father and thinking idly how straight his disordered hair stood up, and how it changed him into a queer silhouette of a pirate or a bandit.

"D'you hear me speak?" Neale asked him.

"Yes," said Hugh. "I heard you."

"Then you answer me."

"O Hugh!" breathed a voice from the window above. Mary Neale had been listening. "Why don't you answer your father? O Hughie, please!"

"Yes," said Hugh, speaking to his father. "Ellen walked home and I walked with her."

"Didn't I tell you I wouldn't have you goin' with that Brock girl? Answer me."

"Yes," said Hugh. "You told me."

"Well! that all you've got to say?"

"I should like," said Hugh, "to go to bed."

Neale waited for an instant and his wife, at the window, held her breath. Then he turned, went into the house, and shut the door. Hugh heard the turning of the key. He stood there for a moment, his hands in his pockets, and thought. And he smiled. After his happy evening, nothing so far away as his father's wrath could touch him nearly.

"Hugh," he heard his mother breathe above, "the pantry window's open."

Then came her hasty flight across the floor. She meant to reach her own room before her husband did. Hugh whistled a little under his breath. He did not propose trying the pantry window. There was a stiffness of obstinacy in him equal to his father's. This, he reasoned, was his father's house, and, if he was forbidden it, he was forbidden. He sat down on the upper step and leaned against the pillar of the porch and thought of Ellen. He thought definitely, too, of going away. His father seemed to have settled the date of his going: for Hugh could not imagine the door once locked against him unlocked by the same hand. But he was not willing to go that night. He must see his mother and he must see Ellen. He sat there in some discomfort now that the night wore to a lower ebb, and as he felt himself slipping off to sleep the door behind him was unlocked softly and Aunt Tab came out. She was in her nightgown and over it a dark cloak. Hugh got up drowsily and whispered:

"Go back, Aunt Tab. I'm all right. If I'm not, I can go into the barn."

She put a hand on his arm and drew him after her; it was a trembling hand, eloquent with insistent nerves.

"We'll come out toward the barn anyway," she whispered. "Come, Hughie, come."

He followed her across the yard, and they stopped by the barnyard where the cows were chewing their cuds and it was all sweet breath and acrid smells. There she paused in the shadow of the great elm.

"Hughie," said she, "I guess now you'll feel's if the time had come. You'll feel as if you'd got to go away. Don't you feel so, Hugh?"

"Yes," said Hugh, surprised that she should formulate it for him. "I guess I'd better go."

"If he's got his mad up," said Tabitha wisely, "he never'll give in, not if you prayed him on your bended knees."

"No," said Hugh. "I guess that's right."

"Well," said Aunt Tab. She had a wild, almost unctuous air of hugging herself, so great was the triumph of the moment. "I've got some money, Hughie. It's for you."

Hugh felt himself come awake to a reality as cool as the morning's growing chill. It was not that the prospect of money moved him so tremendously; it was the wonder of Aunt Tab's having it.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked.

"I've sold the wood lot," she said, with her little nervous chuckle.

"By thunder! you haven't? Who'd you sell it to?"

"Squire Greene."

"Does he know?" Again "he" meant his father.

"No," said Aunt Tab, laughing the more unguardedly. "'Course he don't. He never'd let me in the world."

Hugh's wonder shifted to concern for her.

"Why, he'll kill you," he told her. "Don't you know he will?"

"Well," said Aunt Tab, careering on her high horse of life and action at last, "I can't die but once. Live while ye live, Hughie. Don't ye say so?"

"I'll tell you what I do think," said Hugh. "You'd better go straight over to Squire Green's, as soon's the sun is up, and call it off."

"Why, no, Hughie, I can't do that," she said. "The deed's passed an' all. An' I've got the money. I've got it right here in my hand, an' I'm goin' to give it to you so's you can set sail as soon as ever you like."

Hugh had never before recognized the sensation of finding everything so exceedingly queer that he must be dreaming or that something was wrong with his brain.

"But Aunt Tab," said he, "you can't do that, you know. You can't carry round money in your hand — and expect me to take it," he ended weakly.

To his distress, and his irritation, too, she began to whimper.

"How much d' he give you for it?" he asked brusquely, to bring her back.

She stopped whimpering and wiped her eyes.

"I can't ever tell that," she said. "He made me promise not to. I give my solemn word."

"Who made you promise?" Hugh loved Aunt Tab at that moment with a heartiness that would have surprised her. She never expected to be loved. But he also felt a measureless exasperation against her. "Who made you promise?"

"Squire Greene."

Then, he concluded, Squire Greene had done her. But he understood too well how dear her poor little scheme had been to her, how colossal the courage that had led her to it. He would not break her heart by telling her she had probably carried it out disastrously.

"Look here, Aunt Tab," he said, coaxing her, "you go in and creep into bed, and we'll talk about it some other time."

"But here's the money," she said piteously. She was tendering him something in a tremulous hand. "You take the money, Hughie. It's for you."

"Why, I wouldn't," said he, "I wouldn't any more take it —" And there he stopped, because she began again to whimper. "How'd you happen to have it in bills?" he asked. "D'he give it to you like that?"

"Oh, yes," said she, laughing a little. This too was evidently a part of her cleverness. "I beseeched him to. He had to go to the bank an' draw it out. I ain't got much faith in their checks an' things. Besides, I knew 'twould be easier for you to spend. You take it, Hughie. I'm kind of uneasy with it. I want to get it out o' my hands."

At that instant came a call, a voice they knew.

"Hugh! Hugh! where are you? Come here. I want you."

The voice was Mary Neale's. Aunt Tab stood for an instant in a perfect silence, and then, like some creature of the night, vanished away into its shelter. Hugh, after his own startled moment, ran to the house. A formless alarm awoke in him. His father must have locked her out, too, he thought, and she was calling him.

XI

When Thomas Neale left Hugh outside the door and went back into his chamber, his wife was waiting for him, standing straight and still in the middle of the room. The folds of her nightgown exalted her to a goddess of the grand type, and the braids of her hair accentuated those austere lines. Thomas glanced at her, but she did not look beautiful to him, only troublesome, calling out of the window at night with entreaties that interrupted discipline. It is doubtful if he ever saw her nowadays with the eyes of admiration or longing. She was like a figure in the landscape, always to be there and not to be regarded save as he fitted his daily toil to hers. She was pale and her eyes burned somberly upon him; but she saw from his face that this was not a time to speak, and when he had got into bed she lay down beside him. Neale was asleep shortly. Active rulings of his household tired him as much as the work of his hands. They were exhausting, and yet the completed conquest of another will gave him a satisfaction, too, that sent him off the more tranquilly. There was some use in living when you could so accurately and powerfully impose your own way. But Mary did not sleep. She lay, eyes wide open, looking absently at the waving pattern of the curtain on the wall. There were things she was tempted to think out to their depth, but she held them back with a desperate hand. The obsession was upon her to leap to the past and rehearse from there the wrongs out of which this wrong had been born. But that way lay the madness of complete emotional overthrow. She could not risk it. Her husband would resent

it and her own dignity forbade. But her heart ached with a maternal passion that threw Hugh back from his man's estate to the shelter of her arms and the pillowing of her breast. He was no more than a baby to her at the moment. It was his day, too, his graduation day, and she had sent him out in the new suit she had managed for him with weary diplomacy, to be happy in his youth. And now he was somewhere in the night, all his wonderful hours wiped out by the hateful inhospitality of his own home. The hour went on and then another, and suddenly a different kind of rage came awake in her, a scorn of herself, that she should submit to the wrong, a terror lest the night should pass while she lay there meanly bewailing it. She turned her head to the window, in apprehension lest the light had come. If it had, she could not conceive how to bear it. If the night passed while she acquiesced, she could never live again.

"Thomas!" she called.

Her voice in the still chamber gave her a thrill of courage. She had at least begun. Her husband stirred and she called him again. He opened his eyes and saw her sitting up in bed beside him.

"What is it?" he asked. "You sick?"

At another moment the question, in her hungering for affection from him, would have drawn her to him, her heart weak as water as women's hearts grow with their pathetic turning to love where no love is: but not now. She felt only an unbridled triumph that she had begun.

"Thomas," she said, "it's only right to tell you I'm going to open the door and let Hughie in."

"You stay where you be," said Neale. His voice was scarcely harsh as yet. It was drowsy and, through that, surprised.

"I'm going to call him in," said Mary, in an exaltation

of her mother passion. "I'm going to tell him to go up to his bed and lay as long as he wants to in the morning."

Neale put out his hand and grasped her wrist.

"You stay where you be," he said again. "You're all worked up, I tell ye. Lay down an' go to sleep. It's more'n an hour to daylight."

The soft wrist lay beating in his like a little creature that panted to be free but knew its weakness and was still. And as his hand relaxed under the silent suasion of its yielding, she twisted it loose, and with the same movement, set her feet on the floor. She threw back the braids of her hair and stood there an instant, glad in her revolt, putting on slippers and a wrapper. She must have something over her nightgown, she reasoned, for Hughie might have gone, and she was resolved to follow him, however far. Neale sat up in bed and watched her hasty movements.

"You listen to me," he said.

Mary knew that voice. It was the voice that laid down the law to whatever withstood him. And no one that lived with him had ever withstood him long. "I won't have him under my roof."

That he did not entirely mean. She was driving him farther, he realized, than he had meant to go. Hugh was only to be punished by a night out of doors, to think over his lawlessness. He was not really to be banished for good.

"It ain't your roof," said Mary, in a blithe voice that amazed him. She was tasting the exhilaration of lawlessness herself. "Anyway, I should think 'twas mine as much as 'tis yours. And the children you've brought into the world,—it's theirs, too. But if Hughie's got no right here, why, I ain't either, for I'm Hughie's mother. And I'm going to call him now."

She went swiftly out of the room, and Neale sat there in the dark, looking after her. He was profoundly moved and puzzled. This was her first revolt since the early years of their marriage when she had properly learned to understand a woman's limitations of power and governance. He heard her call from the porch. Presently there were footsteps on the stair and the soft opening and closing of a door. He thought grimly that Hugh had snapped at her invitation and crept up to his room. But the steps were those of Aunt Tab. Neale lay down again and closed his eyes. Whatever the campaign was to be, he could conduct it by daylight only, and he was bent on getting his accustomed sleep.

Mary Neale, standing at the door and looking into the night, called and then listened. And presently Hugh came up to her close, so that she felt the dear warmness of him. She led him down the steps and, with an abandonment he had never seen in her, put her arms about him and rested her head on his shoulder. He had always taken mother for granted, a beneficent necessity in the world; but now, when he felt her quivering against him, he knew what it was to be passionately loved. The wonder of it broke up his own springs of feeling and made him also tremulous, but above all, shy.

"O Hughie," she kept saying. "Hughie! You come in. You go up to bed and I won't call you till you've had your sleep out. O Hughie! Hughie!"

But Hugh couldn't come in. He felt that as convincingly as he felt her love for him; he could never come unless his father called him.

"You got something on your feet?" he asked, in an awkward tenderness. "Then you step out a little way where they won't hear us."

She straightened herself, with a breath, and let him lead

her across to the old tree where he had talked with Aunt Tab.

"Don't you see, mum," said Hugh, "it's 'most morning? I don't want to go to bed. I'll run over to Larry Greene's and tell him about the exercises. I didn't see him there. Truly, mum, I don't want to go to bed."

"You won't go to Larry Greene's," said Mary desperately. "You mean to run away."

"I never'll run away," said Hugh, "without telling you beforehand. There!"

"What's that?" said Mary. Her eye had caught a figure stealing toward the house.

"Nobody," said Hugh, holding her still. "I mean, it's Aunt Tab. She's been out here."

"Out here?" asked poor Mary. She had a jealous pang because Tabitha had been braver than she. "With you?"

"Yes. Mother, she's sold the wood lot."

"Sold the wood lot? Who to?"

"Squire Greene."

"Why," said Mary, thinking at once of Neale, "he'll kill her."

"Well, she's sold it anyway. And she brought the money out here and wanted me to take it to go away on."

"D'you take it?"

"No, 'course I didn't. I couldn't take her money."

His mother gave him a great surprise.

"O Hugh," said she, "you take it. You go right across the water — if you stay this side of the ocean somehow you'll be made to knuckle down — and you learn to play, same as you want to, and you can pay her back."

He was amazed at her tumultuous unreason.

"Why," said he, "I should think you'd be the last one

in the world to tell me to take Aunt Tab's money away from her. It's all she's got."

"She's got a home here," said Mary. She was possessed by her fierceness of desire for him. "That's all she wants."

"Well, s'pose he takes that away from her," said Hugh. "When he finds out what she's done he's going to be madder'n ever he was in his life. You know that. S'pose he turns her out same's he has me?"

"He can't," said Mary. "She's got a right to a home here, got it by law."

"That's all very well," said Hugh; "but he can make the house too hot to hold her."

"I'll stand by her," said Mary. "If she goes, I'll go, too. I'll work and slave for her. But Hughie, think of that money. Money, right in your hand! There ain't a living way we can come on money again. She'd leave it to you anyways."

"She'd leave it to Ben, too," said he. "Anyway, she ought to."

"Your father'll look out for Ben. And Ben don't want anything same's you do. Why, Hugh, think of the time going and going and your hands all stiffened up —"

He drew a quick breath at that. She had touched him, she knew. How often, in moments of boyish despair, she had seen him looking at his hands, after some hard piece of farm work, as if they were dulled tools that could never be made right again. But he caught himself up and shook off the spell of her pleading.

"Well," said he, "anyway I'm going over to Larry's now. And don't you stand up for me, mum. You'll only get hurt. You've done me all the good you can."

What he wanted to tell her was that her great rush of love had wiped out his bitterness and that he was

happier than before that cleansing flood; but he couldn't manage it. He only gave her a rough hug, and Mary knew. Then she made him promise over again never to go away without telling her and called him back to say if it was easier he might go any time and without notice. Perhaps it would be better. Only he must write to her through Larry Greene. She went in, cold with the morning chill, her slippers soaked with dew, and not letting herself think what atmosphere she should find there, up to her chamber. Her husband was still in bed, and neither turned nor opened his eyes, and Mary dressed quietly and went downstairs again.

XII

Hugh went through the woods to Larry's and made slow progress of it. He meant to wait, before calling Larry, until the day had come. In the woods, rousing themselves now, with a bird syllable here and there, he turned aside the step that would take him to the violet bank where he had lost Ellen and begun the silly dreadful time when she would not speak. Where he had hurt her, now his awakened mind said tenderly. The violets were gone, but could he ever bring her back there and ask her to understand the foolish ignorant heart of him that had only begun to understand itself? His courage was high, in spite of anything Thomas Neale could do. Thomas Neale seemed, like most of the powers made to be escaped, only an adverse force of life. Heart of youth was very strong that morning, and even gay. Larry was up early and had his coffee boiling when Hugh at last came to the door. Larry was in his blue working clothes, a blouse of his own conception and trousers that came into high laced boots. He had a certain vanity, and it was all toward the end of a picturesque cleanliness. Ellen had set his table the night before; the brown linen cloth was glossy and the blue dishes were lovely accents on it. Larry at the stove, frowningly settling his coffee, glanced up, as Hugh passed the window, and hailed him at the door.

"Well," said he, "what's the matter with you?"

Hugh, in spite of his high courage, had begun to wear an out-all-night look, and Larry judged that something

extraordinary must have happened to keep him in his gala suit of yesterday. He came in, threw down his cap and took a chair.

"Hungry," said he.

Then, having reached a goal of some sort, he did feel suddenly tired, and passed a hand over his eyes. When he winked them wide again, a pained, tired look had entered them. This Larry saw, as he was putting on another cup and slicing more bread. His own eggs were done, and he opened them carefully, for he was particular about the consistency of eggs. But he dropped three more in the water and looked at the clock.

"How many minutes?" he asked.

"Minutes?" said Hugh. "Oh, eggs? I don't know."

"Hard or soft?"

"Any old way."

Larry judged what was best for him, and then they said no more until they had lowered the pile of bread and drunk two cups apiece and the eggs were gone. Then Larry leaned back and put his hands in his pockets and said:

"Out with it! on the loose?"

"Well!" said Hugh. He began to laugh. He was curiously ashamed, chiefly of his father and a little of himself. It wasn't tragic to be turned out of the house. It was, in a way, childish and funny. But he told it all, except the very cause. He didn't mention Ellen. His father, he said, was on his high horse because Hugh had come in late. Larry wasn't surprised. He listened thoughtfully and offered no advice. But when Hugh went on to tell him about Aunt Tab and the wood lot, he came awake to a wide-eyed interest, and exclaimed once or twice and thumped the table.

"But you don't actually mean," he said, "she's been

and done that off her own bat. Without a soul to advise her — or tempt her —"

"Oh," said Hugh, with a slow smile, as it began to strike him the more vividly through Larry's eyes, "I guess there was somebody to tempt her all right."

"Brother Abial," agreed Larry. "My own brother as ever was. Hugh, what do you s'pose she got for it?"

"She won't tell."

They shook their heads at each other, in concurring doubt.

"Looks bad, don't it?" said Larry.

"I thought so," said Hugh.

"Easy enough to see — Why, he'd sell a coffin plate." Larry burst into a shout of laughter. "I haven't thought of it for years, but that reminds me. He did! he did! He was going to take off Aunt Nelly's coffin plate before they went to the grave, and mother forbade it. Hugh, how much is that wood lot worth?"

Hugh shook his head.

"I don't know. A number of thousands."

"Yes, with lumber as it is now. Well, if she got a number of hundreds out of him, she's lucky."

"Father'll kill her," said Hugh. He had been as jealously proud as his mother of concealing Neale's tyranny from the little neighborhood world; but now, having yielded that position, it seemed singularly easy to betray the whole. It was comfortable, too, as it might be after one had lived alone and sadly, to taste companionship.

"D'you s'pose the deed's been recorded?" Larry asked.

"Don't know. Why?"

"I thought," said Larry, in a most ordinary way, "I might break into the house and steal it."

Hugh stared at him, and then he laughed.

"You're stringing me," he said. "You can do it any time."

"Oh, I mean it all right," said Larry. "If I could beat Brother Abial, I'd do it. I've no compunctions about a fellow like that. You can't have. He's a shark. Harpoon him! kill him! He hasn't even blubber or ambergris, like an honest whale. But I guess we can't do anything. His deed's tight enough. Brother Abial's a business man."

"No," said Hugh, "we can't do anything."

They sat there and mused for a few minutes, and then Larry looked up at him sharply.

"I'll tell you what, Hugh," he said, "I'd do it."

"Do what?"

"Take the money and go abroad."

"Aunt Tab's money?"

"Sure as you're born. She'll get more out of it that way. It's what she did it for — played her little game, made her throw. What's the use of being a Puritan and disappointing her? In the first place, the money won't do her any good in her own pocket. Tom Neale wouldn't let it. But if she blows it in straight off, he can't get it out of her and tie it up so tight she never'll see a dollar of it. That's what he'd do. Don't you know he he would?"

"Yes," said Hugh, "I guess that's what he'd do."

"But if he finds she's staked you and you've gone, lock, stock and barrel,— I don't know but there's something about the magnificent daring of it that will soften his arid soul. He might admire her, and not kill her at all. Only drag her round the room by the hair of her head."

"Don't!" said Hugh.

"Because, see here! the wood lot's gone anyway. You

can't get it back. And you might as well do something righteous with the money."

Hugh looked him in the face, and his breath came with difficulty over a thing that was hard to say.

"You don't think I need to go abroad to study," he said. It was like an accusation.

"I don't," said Larry. "But I don't believe you'll ever settle down to man's work till you make a try at it. If you went abroad, tramped it, roughed it, that would put more life into you than I've had in my whole miserable existence. It'll give you the world — at a gulp. Go ahead. And come back picked clean, not a pinfeather on you. And settle down, to work like the devil and do something magnificently well."

"No, you don't believe I can do what I want to," said Hugh bitterly.

"Hugh," said Larry, with a kindness so real that suddenly the youth found his eyes full of tears, "you don't want to play the fiddle any more than you want to do a dozen things. Only you're in love with music, and you're chock full of life and romance. And yeast. That's it: youth."

"If I could study," said Hugh, "I could prove it to you."

"That's it. That's what I want you to do. Start out alone and have your adventure. Don't lose your money and don't let women get hold of you, and come back, when you've seen what the world is like, and you'll be fit to live. I wish I'd gone when I was your age. I wish to God I had."

"Come with me," said Hugh weakly.

"No. You don't want an Aged P. to interpret the globe. You've got to see it at first hand."

"Sometimes," said Hugh, with a returning bitterness,

"I'm pretty sure I'm no good. If there was anything in me, why didn't I go years ago? I wanted to enough."

"You've been driven on the curb," said Larry, "you and Ben, too. It's kept you — immature."

He couldn't really find the word that was not offensive. But he knew they had still been little boys when they should have been big boys, and now when they were young men they had to attain their self-mastery at a bound and do it unaided. They didn't know the world, even their short radius. Neale had drawn their horizon tight and hedged it with his ignorant will.

And as they sat there, the forenoon brightening and warming about them, some one came to Larry's door who had never been there before. He jumped out of his chair in such startled and hospitable haste that he knocked it over.

"Miss Tabitha!" he said. "Come in."

Aunt Tabitha was not in calling trim, but she was in the calmest of calling spirits. She wore her morning dress of print, and a shawl with palm leaves lay about her shoulders. She had acquired all her ideals of dress in an age when it was judged immodest to go "in the figure." Her cheeks were bright and her hand a little tremulous. It was evident she had hurried.

"Hughie," said she, "your mother's got it all planned out. She couldn't get away so well as I could — Brother Thomas seems to be in the barn — but she kind of thinks you'd better walk over to the Junction an' not take the train here, for she figgers it out Brother Thomas is goin' to harness up to find you. An' she thinks here's the place he'll come first. So she'll harness up the colt as soon as he's gone with old Grey, an' take your trunk over to the Junction an' send it by express. Your fiddle's in it, packed up tight."

"But," said Hugh, "I haven't any trunk." He was entirely dazed. Indeed it was no small thing to tell a youth who had been out of his native town but half a dozen times in his life that he was to be thrown, neck and crop, into the continent of Europe.

"It's your mother's little weddin' trunk," said Aunt Tab calmly.

To Larry, it seemed she was enjoying the delirious moment with an intensity that was pain. Aunt Tab had never lived before. She had skulked from danger and crouched under leaves, and now she was out in the open, fighting, and she felt the glory of it.

"Where's she sending it?" asked Hugh, frowning at her. He felt that, if he could take in some of these strange details, he might understand Aunt Tab herself, this new fighting Aunt Tab who trembled but yet spoke quietly.

"She's sendin' it to the ship."

"What ship?"

"Here 'tis," said Aunt Tab, diving into her long pocket. She took out a newspaper clipping and gave it to him. "Your mother knows all about it. She asked the minister to Beckenham more'n a year ago what ship he went on, an' 'twas this one. An' your mother's kep' track of it ever since."

"But maybe I can't get passage," said Hugh. If he had had more faith in the practical address of mother and Aunt Tab, he might have felt a warmer concurrence with them.

"Go steerage then," said Larry violently. "Or get passage on another boat. Your mother's a great woman, Hugh. Be a man."

"I've got to see her," said Hugh. Involuntarily he

had thrown his shoulders back. Larry need not challenge him in that way. He was a man.

"Yes," said Aunt Tab. "That's why she thinks you better take the midnight. She says you come up along about eight an' wait in the shadder o' the big elm. She kinder thinks Brother Thomas'll be drivin' round the country after you."

"What does he want of me?" said Hugh. "He turned me out."

"Well," said Aunt Tab, "be that as it may —" She hardly knew how to express it, but she was shrewdly confident that Brother Thomas would not let a son escape his jurisdiction if it could be helped. "Now, Hughie," said she, "here's the money." She dived to the depths of her pocket and brought out the roll of bills, tied tightly with a tape. She nodded gaily at him. "Now you have a good time, Hughie, an' learn all you can. An' you come back. Come as quick as ever you feel to — but not till you've learned it all."

He was not touching the roll, and she laid it on the table, with a look at Larry, a question in it and a plea for help.

"Yes," said Larry, "he'll take it."

Hugh hurried after her to the door.

"Aunt Tab," said he, "have you given me the whole of it?"

She answered his look with the gayest one of her own.

"Don't you fret, Hughie," she said. "Law! don't you fret. I've got plenty more."

But Larry knew it was all she had. Hugh caught her up by the door and clung to the palm leaf shawl. He had never kissed Aunt Tab since he was a little boy and she had coaxed him with peppermints; but now he threw

awkward arms about her and put a close kiss on the pink cheek. It was pinker after that. This again was a great moment for Aunt Tab. And when Hugh had blundered back to his chair and sat there, his elbows on the table, his head in his hands, Larry, too, put out his hand to Aunt Tabitha, and she, a little surprised, because there were no formal leave-takings among neighbors, in Bromley, laid hers in it. Larry, in a courtly way, carried the hand to his lips, and Aunt Tab, after one startled glance at him, was gone. And now she was crying. But it was because life was so astonishing to her, so like Godey's too: for there ladies did admirable deeds, and gentlemen kissed their snowy finger-tips. Larry went back into the room and dropped a hand on Hugh's shoulder.

"If you don't want a scrap with your father," he said, "you'll have to get out of here. He'll come here first."

Hugh straightened and looked at the money.

"There it is," he said, in wonder and distaste.

"Count it," said Larry.

Hugh took it gingerly — the bills were dirty, strangely, to their minds, as they ought to have been from a transaction with Squire Greene — and untied the tape. He counted, and Larry counted with him.

"Eleven hundred," said both, at the end, and Hugh added:

"She said she'd got some more. Do you s'pose she has?"

Larry was unmoved in certainty that she had not; but he passed over that.

"If she hasn't, Brother Abial's a rascal: that is, more of a rascal than I know him to be. Now we'll rig up some kind of a belt for you, or rivet it into your inside pocket, and you can take a note to a friend of mine in

Boston, and he'll get you a letter of credit and hold his tongue. See here: what if you should go up into my bedroom and have a sleep? And if Ardelia comes to do the work, I'll tell her I'm writing and she can clear out. And if your father comes, I'll take my fowling-piece to him."

Hugh was getting blind with weariness. He went up the stairs, took off his coat and threw himself on Larry's bed.

XIII

All that spring Ellen had been in trouble. It was of a sort that attacked her savagely and the next day told her it wasn't a real trouble, only a suspicion of her own. The suspicion itself was hardly less ravaging than the fear it brought, because, under its whispers and her own credence of them, she felt so base. The trouble was the tin peddler. He was Peleg Simpson, who had the very soul of a peddler, for he had driven a cart for thirty years, changing his goods with the wares most in vogue. When he began, a young man, his cart was large, stocked with tin, and with brooms and pails and jingling things hung on behind. But the favor of tin declined somewhat, and he rose to granite ware, and now he carried that and a small stock of aluminum. The aluminum was chiefly a bait, to get housewives to looking and coveting; it was really too expensive for country neighborhoods. Only Clara Greene launched out recklessly, and Mary Neale had a few saucepans she used with care and Hannah would not accept at all, affecting to believe there was something that "come off" on the food. Also, in these later days, Peleg was an essence man and arrived sometimes in a little covered cart bearing spices, "flavoring" and tea. He had done well at his business, and lived in a large white house at Bromley Wells, five miles away, with his niece for housekeeper,— a feather-headed girl who was about to marry. The house was much admired by Bromley, as it drove by, a house with a tower, and gingerbread work on the veranda pillars. Peleg was a wiry,

tall man with thin red hair, watery blue eyes and a long chin-beard. He had a loud high voice and a crass sense of humor that contributed to the selling of ware and essences. Housewives laughed when they saw him coming up the path. He was known as droll. "Ain't he droll?" they said to one another, after he had been on a conquering tour through the neighborhood, leaving, even against their intention, pans at every door. Only Mary Neale regarded him with a dispassionate and sometimes a sedately wondering gaze. She did not frown upon his jokes. She had no self-consciousness of dignity to be offended; but she thought a commercial hilarity uncalled-for. Ellen hated him. She hated his jocular talk and his cackling laugh, she hated his freckled hands with the fine gold down over them, and she hated the wrinkled back of his neck. The temperament of Peleg was ill-suited to hers. He wanted to please, and it was his misfortune to shed his favor without distinction of temperament in its recipients. Little boys liked him, in a contemptuous, thrifty way: for he gave them "lickorish" and gum. On little girls he bestowed small sweets and exacted toll; he held them at a daring height above his head and snatched them to him for a kiss. He was an honest man. The kiss was tribute to their charms — pretty as pinks, he said they were; it was appropriately their due. They took it in various fashions, some patiently, clutching the sweetie as they ran off and forgetting at once, in its delights, the foolish odd price they had to pay. Grissie he never kissed at all: for when she was little she had smitten him soundly in the face and then stood her ground, insisting on the gibraltar that was to have been the price of the salute, and ready to smite again. Peleg hooted with laughter and gave her the "gib," and ever after they were cronies, tossing derisive

jeers back and forth, with no question of a gallant toll. But Ellen, at their one encounter, felt a world tragedy upon her shoulders. He had put both hands on her little tight waist and held her up so that, in her one glance, she saw herself confronted by the dreadful red freckled face and the laughing eyes. The eyes were terrible to her. They were honestly quickened; but to her affrighted fancy they leered like the eyes of the wolf at poor Red Riding Hood. Instantly she shut her own to bar out the sickening sight, and she had a queer feeling in her poor little stomach, as if the world were smothering her and she could neither cry out nor struggle. And then, seeing with wonder her sickness over her plight, he concluded he had frightened her by holding her so high, and put her down again. And, in his well-meaning mercy, he forbore to kiss her but "bairded" her instead, rubbed his horrible rough cheek against hers, and then pressed a large pink lozenge into her hand. Ellen ran, without another glance at him; but she did, in that moment, see that her mother was standing by: and her mother was laughing. Her opinion of mothers, after this, had to be pondered on and revised many times as they seemed, in different lights, kind or cruel. But the pink checkerberry fell out of her little hand, and she fled behind the barn to cry passionately, why she did not know. Only something in her had been outraged, and it was this that cried. Ardelia picked the lozenge up and kept it; and that night when they were all there, father, mother and Ellen, sitting by the open fire, she brought it out and gave it to her. Ellen looked curiously at it, lying there in her lap. She got up and the lozenge dropped to the floor. Then she took the tongs, secured it carefully, laid it on the coals and went back to her seat.

"What under the sun d'you do that for?" her father

asked, and mother laughed and told him the story, while Ellen sat by, with a swelling heart, wondering if father, too, would laugh. But he looked quite grave in a way she loved.

"A man ought to know better than to do a thing like that," he said warmly. "If I'd been there, I'd told him so. I don't know's I'd stopped at that. I'd give him somethin' to remember."

"Law!" said Ardelia. "He's terrible fond o' children, an' he ain't got any of his own."

"Well," said father, "he can let Ellen be."

Ellen did not say anything, but, in a few minutes, when they had begun to talk of something else, she got up and went over to father and stood there leaning against him. He lifted her to his knee, and she put her head on his shoulder and went to sleep, comforted. But she never lost her terror of the tin peddler. Whenever she heard the jingling of his cart or saw it coming down the road, she ran, as fast as her legs could carry her, to the barn, and climbed up to a hiding place in the mow. Not even her mother knew where she was then; for Ellen remembered mother had laughed and there was no community, as to tin peddlers, between her and a mother who might betray her.

When she began to go to the Academy, and judged she was really on the road to being a young lady, she made up her mind, unadvised, that it was time to get the better of the peddler nightmare. So she fled to the barn no more, but she did manage, with nice calculation, not to encounter Peleg within four walls. Her reason told her he never kissed grown up girls; but her blood still rebelled against the possible indignity of being "bairded." For a year or so he had seemed to drive about less. He was getting prosperous, people said, and sold out nearer

home. But within the last year it came on Ellen with a sick surprise that he was coming a great deal, and that he often stopped at their house. It was always when she was in school; but Ardelia quite innocently retailed to her the bits of news he brought. They were so abundant that Ellen began to see he must have extended his commercial visit. She grew clever in her suspicions and noted, with a sick heart, that his horse had been there long enough to paw a hole by the hitching-post, or that the dinner dishes were undone in the late afternoon. Mother had sat down to entertain him, she thought; and indeed Ardelia owned it, with her ready laugh.

"I got talkin' with Peleg," she would say, "an' the time slipped away without my knowin' it."

There began in Ellen the poignant jealousy of a girl over the mother who has been set apart in her mind with the father, one of the sacred three that make the family. Poor Ardelia had her abounding silliness, but she was mother, in spite of them, embodiment of the wonder and safety and warmth of childish life. Now a change seemed to have come over her. She bridled a little when she mentioned Peleg, and a certain laugh she apparently kept for his name, prefaced her chronicle of his tales. Ellen hated the little laugh. It was perhaps only embarrassment that tinged it, but she shrank from it, pretended not to hear it and indeed feigned to ignore his name and the recounting of his works. And one day, coming home from school, she and Grissie alone together, they had seen, as they rounded the curve in the road, the tin peddler's horse at Ardelia's gate, not harnessed into the cart but to a shining buggy. Grissie laughed.

"How'd you like a new father?" she inquired carelessly.

Ellen made no answer for a moment. Then she said, in a low and carefully tempered tone:

"How'd you like it if I should strike you?"

Grissie turned to look at her with an undisguised admiration. She respected emotion of any sort, and she could guess what depth of feeling lay in this.

"Why," said she, "d'you feel that way about it? He's got a real pretty house,— money in the bank, too, they say."

Ellen stopped short and Grissie stopped, too, tasting the occasion to the full.

"If you ever mention such a thing to me again," said Ellen, "I'll — kill you."

The blood surged into her face; she looked a fury.

"Why, 'course I won't," said Grissie. "I didn't know you felt so. I shouldn't. Why don't you take what comes?"

Ellen went on up the path and into the house. Her valiant step was the measure of her will. She knew the time had come, as it came when she stopped hiding in the mow, to face the peddler. Perhaps no knight of faerie ever went to the killing of his dragon with a bolder front and a more choking heart, or a keener knowledge of the peril of his quest. She did not stop to take off her hat or lay down her books. Red, with a desperate look, she walked into the sitting-room and found them as she had expected, mother looking silly and Peleg laughing. He was the more intolerable to her that he had on his best suit of a decent blue, and a bright blue tie with a horseshoe pin. Peleg in his Sunday suit was a more ordinary figure than in his every-day clothes, sagged into comfortable wrinkles; but he was no such vulgar image as Ellen found him. Her hatred of him painted him

with its own loathing, and, after one glance, she could hardly look at him again.

"Well, Ellie," said Ardelia, "you got home?"

Ardelia was unconscious of having entered upon a course inviting the reprobation of the young. She was sitting by the center table where she occasionally fingered an annual or pulled out the filaments of the green moss mat where the lamp stood. Peleg sat by the hearth in the one arm-chair the room afforded. It was father's chair, Ellen noted, and her hatred rose in waves and dashed themselves against the wrong done to the eternally absent. The chair had not been held sacred since her father died. Many neighbors had sat in it; but that Peleg Simpson should invade it seemed to her hideously significant.

"Yes," she said coldly to her mother, "I've got home."

She took off her hat and laid it with her books on the sofa. Then she sat down by the window and, hands folded tightly in her lap, looked at her mother tempestuously. The look bade Ardelia do something to get rid of him in a legitimate way, buy a pan or a bottle of vanilla and reduce him to his proper place. Peleg was entirely unconscious of having caused the flurry. With him, life was a matter of "no trouble unless you make it," and he was confident of his ability to get along with all sorts of womenfolk. Was it not his business to persuade them into a buying mood?

"Well, Ellie," said he, "what you goin' to do with all you know?"

"I don't know so very much," said Ellen frigidly.

"Goin' to keep school?" inquired Peleg.

"No," said Ellen.

"Well, I s'pose you'll come acrost some nice fellar, one

o' these days," said Peleg. "Mother'll be lonesome then, unless she goes off first."

And Ardelia laughed a little and put her head on one side and looked silly.

"The idea!" said she, exactly, Ellen thought disgustedly, as Grissie said it.

"Stranger things have happened to folks that ain't half so likely as you be, Ardelia," said Peleg, and laughed in that rasping way he had when he was bolstering his jokes by a gaiety he hoped to make infectious. Poor Peleg! he had all his life tried to please, not only to sell his pots and pans but because mirth was natural to him. He had never once had to fit his conversation to fastidious ideals and crawling nerves. But now Ellen turned to him and spoke with deadly emphasis.

"I'm never going to marry," she said. "I don't like men, especially when they are silly. And my mother can't ever marry, not if she wanted to. She's married to my father."

She rose, picked up her books, with a studied deliberation, and walked out of the room. And when she had laid them down in the kitchen she stole upstairs to the little room that was called hers, though now she slept with her mother in the downstairs bedroom, and there knelt and pressed her hot face into the pillow and her fingers in her ears. She had been a fool. She knew that, and she was afraid Peleg Simpson knew it, too, and she would not hear the cackle of his laugh. But poor Ardelia! never had an unthinking creature been so rudely confronted with the ghost of an unguessed ideal. It seemed as if her husband had walked bodily into the room and forbidden her something she had not yet begun to covet. All Ardelia's instincts were in advance of her rea-

son. It was natural to her to put her head on one side when Peleg told her her skin was as fair as a lily; and because he donned his best suit to come to see her, she was pleased again. She was not in the habit of looking far into the future, and Peleg was an amiable feature of the present. But here she was, confronted by a tempestuous little vixen who seemed to be repeating the marriage service over her and linking her to a ghost. She shivered, and her lip trembled. She looked at him appealingly. Peleg was frankly disconcerted. He had not remembered his old encounter with Ellen. His experiences with little girls were negligible, a part of the persuasiveness of trade. But now he was conscious of being forcibly put in his place by a handsome young shrew who had evidently divined in him what he had not definitely resolved upon as yet. His courting of Ardelia was hardly more than an automatic response to her putting her head on one side; but Ardelia's daughter had seen something alarmingly decisive in it. Was he ready to be decisive? Was he prepared to welcome such a little fury of a step-daughter into his house? He got up, even as Ardelia's troubled glance was beseeching him for comfort, and took his awkward leave:

"Well, I guess I'll be goin' along."

Ardelia, too, got up, and the honest tears escaped her eyes and trickled down her faded cheeks.

"Damn it!" said Peleg to himself, seeing them, and then he was so sorry for her that he took her by the shoulders, quite roughly indeed, because it was against his judgment, and drew her to him in a kindly hug.

"Oh!" Ardelia gasped. But he strode out of the room and left her.

Ardelia was bemused by the strangeness of it. What did he mean by it? Did he mean anything? Or was he

simply showing her, in what she couldn't help feeling was a manly way, that he wouldn't be ordered about by a little girl like Ellen? Ardelia summoned, at this, a dignity of her own. She wouldn't be ordered about either. A new sense of woman's pride had come up in her in the instant of receiving a perquisite of woman's coquetry, and she went out to get supper, holding her head high and bridling. After all, it was pleasant to be comforted so nicely when Ellen had been naughty. But there was a yearning in her heart toward Ellen, too, who must, she felt, be mysteriously feeling ill or she couldn't have been so headstrong, and she made soda biscuits for tea and got out the honey.

"Supper's ready," she called up the stairs.

She had heard Ellen's lagging steps moving about up there, and wondered what she could be doing. It sounded as if she were making the bed. The slow steps came down the stairs and Ellen appeared, her eyes mournful, her face flushed and a heavy indifference upon her.

"You been asleep?" asked Ardelia.

"No," said Ellen, "I've been making the bed."

"For the land's sake!" began Ardelia.

But she stopped. Something laid a hand on her and told her if they entered into talk they could not eat the biscuits with a quiet mind. Later they did talk a little, Ardelia questioning and Ellen answering, but always on the most obvious topics; and when the dishes were washed Ellen told her:

"I guess I'll go up to bed."

She lighted a candle and turned toward the stairs.

"You want somethin' up there?" asked Ardelia.

"No," said Ellen. "I'm going to sleep upstairs. Good-night."

Ardelia stood stricken by something which was not

remorse, because she did not feel it. But she had an ache keener than any she had felt since her first grief when her husband died, hearing the light steps go unfalteringly away from her. She had an idea Ellen might come down again, and sat up past her usual time to hear a sound. Indeed it seemed to her she could not go to bed without knowing how the child was; and at ten she crept up with a candle and stood by the bedside, shading the light from Ellen's face. Ellen lay there in a tight ball, hugging something to her. At first Ardelia did not know what it was; but in perfect uncomprehending surprise she saw it was her own old blue apron she had carried part way up the stairs to put in the rags. Ellen must have brought it up, Ardelia concluded, and forgotten to dispose of it. So she stole away again to her own bed, and went to sleep thinking of Ellen and Peleg in a confusion of drowsiness, and dreamed that her husband had come back and asked harshly where her aprons were. Once in bed, Ardelia was not troubled about the outcome of the afternoon. She thought Ellen had been a little naughty and would come down the next night and sleep with her again. Ellen did not come. She was willing to, but she hardly saw how it could ever be done again. Her mother seemed different to her. But her naughtiness had an effect: for after this Peleg stayed away. He did not even come round on his cart; and when several weeks had gone by, Ardelia grew a little irritable. She thought Ellen had been a very naughty girl indeed, and that it would have been better if she really had reproved her. And it seemed a pity to have hurt the feelings of one so kind as Peleg. So she wrote him a note beginning: "Dear Friend." She was well, she told him, and hoped he was the same. She hoped there were no hard feelings from anything that had occurred. She

signed herself "Ardelia." Since Ellen's dreadful resurrection of David she could not, somehow, add his name. A tear fell on the letter and Ardelia, in a small gust of passion, wished it had made a blot.

XIV

As Larry had prophesied, Neale did go to him in his search for Hugh. Larry was working in his garden, and looked up when Neale stopped at the gate. And characteristically Neale, when he saw the man before him, could not ask his question. It touched him too nearly, and pride was in arms at seeking satisfaction from one he despised. So he made a little talk about the weather, an unheard-of discursiveness from him, and drove on. His trip to the railway station had resulted only in a similar interchange with the station master, and the man, idly amused, wondered why old Tom was wasting time and words. Then he went home to the noon dinner, and sat down to it, but without a word to Mary. Nor did he speak throughout the meal. She and Ben ate hastily, as they always did when the cloud lowered. She had not put on a plate for Hugh, and Neale had drawn his own conclusions. She knew, he told himself, that the boy was off for good. When he had pushed away his chair and gone out to the barn, still without speaking, an appalling possibility flashed upon Mary. Perhaps he had entered upon one of those silent withdrawals which are so terrifying to the creature that must encounter them. He was not going to speak. She had a mad desire to test it, to run out to the barn and besiege him now with a question and so set her heart at rest. But she instantly forbade herself. If he had not really resolved on such a penalty, and she hurried him into it by

indiscretion, he would never, his position once taken, retreat from it. Ben was ready with his question on the instant Neale's foot had struck the ground:

"Mum, where's Hugh?"

Mary looked at him for a long moment. She wanted to answer, to win a sympathizer for Hugh's cause: but she dared not implicate him.

"Ben," said she, "I don't believe I'll tell you."

"Oh, come on," said Ben, laying hold of her wrist as she passed him, in the easy affection that served him for bribery. "I bet he's run off. Tell me. I won't tell."

Mary drew her hand away from him and went on, carrying the dishes from the table to the sink. Ben wished she didn't have to wrinkle up her forehead that way and drop the corners of her mouth. He had never been able to see that so much worry made any practical difference in the discomforts of life. A pleasing diplomacy seemed to him the only effective thing. No middle-aged man of the world had ever taken more fully to heart the axiom that life is a series of compromises.

"I know you wouldn't mean to tell," said Mary. "But I don't want you to be asked."

"I'd just as soon be asked," said Ben idly. He had lounged to the window and was pulling the shade up and down in a way that assaulted his mother's nerves. But she was not the woman to fuss over trifles. "If he asks me, I'll tell him I don't know."

Mary set down the dish she was carrying and faced the thought she had combated more than once in her own mind.

"Ben, you mustn't tell your father a lie."

Ben laughed pleasantly.

"Oh, come off, mum," said he. "'Course I shall lie, I've got to, if he gets me into a corner. Why, mum, you

did. Remember that time you told him you'd asked Ardelia to sell the house? Well, you were in a corner then. You weren't to blame. Don't you remember? It was great."

Did she remember it? If he had known she remembered it with such regret that there was not a day when she did not drag it out, like a scourge, to beat herself with it and adjure herself never to fall so far again, he would, she thought, have been too merciful to remind her. She forced herself to face it.

"Ben," said she, "that was a sin."

"Oh, come," said Ben, "what's the use of calling things such big names? You've got to lie to him. He bids for it. You couldn't live with him if you didn't."

Mary stood still in the middle of the room, her eyes bent upon the floor, thinking.

"I've seen a good deal," she said, "when I haven't spoken. I've noticed you haven't always been straight with your father, particularly the last year. I've wondered whether what I did then made it any easier for you to do it. I guess it did. I'm pretty sure it did."

Ben gave the shade a final fling to its topmost notch and came over to her.

"'Course it didn't," he said. "Only I like to jolly you about it. You're too good, mum. That's the matter with you. O Lord! what's that?"

His father was calling:

"Ben, you come out here an' help Trueman harness up. He's goin' down to the lower lot to open the hay. You go with him."

"See?" said Ben. "He's harnessed into the buggy. He's going off after Hugh. All right," he called. "I'm coming."

Neale drew up, midway from the barn to the road.

"You can come now," he said grimly. "I'll wait till I see you start."

So Ben, with a wry face at his mother, got his hat and went, with a dramatic cheerfulness, to his work. And it was then that Aunt Tab appeared from upstairs and made rapturous report to Mary about her adventures at Larry Greene's. Neale was away all day. He drove to the Junction and there he did ask a question. Had Ben or Hugh got there yet? He judged it a misleading cleverness to use Ben's name also. No, they had not been there. Then he drove at random. And when he came back, in the late afternoon, haggard but still silent, he did not speak, and again Mary dared not force the issue and challenge him. At the early supper she caught the quick glance he cast at Hugh's place where no plate was set, and knew he guessed out her knowledge and yet would not ask her. That night was full of soft southerly gusts. The rain was coming. Yet it would be hours on the way, and there was a certain sweet expectancy, a star here and there, as soft clouds ran over, and a fitful light. In the shadow of the old elm, Mary Neale met Hugh, and, the dimness giving her courage, for she was a shy woman who did not easily show her love, she took him to her heart. Hugh was again amazed at the love she had for him; the straining embrace, the touch of her wet cheek on his were revelations of a divine passion he was learning. He had seen mothers kiss their babies' feet and hands in an adoring ecstasy, and this seemed to him as warm and wonderful. In that instant he learned that for her he had never grown up and he, also with the courage of the night upon him, held her close and put his moved heart into a broken murmuring of her name. But her possession of him was as short as wonderful.

"You must go, dear," she said. "He didn't start out to-night as I thought he would. He'll miss me. But you write to me. You remember—" and then the secret of her life came out in her desire to give him all she had, to carry away with him—"remember you're more to mother than anybody or anything on earth." And she called him "darling"— a word that had never passed her lips in their sedate intercourse — and kissed him again with the passionate baby kisses and was gone. Hugh made a step after her, and called her once; but she answered: "No! no!" in a hushed voice, and her soft darkness had joined the obscurity of the night. He stood there trembling with the misery of it, the splendor, too, and held his hands clenched and winked away the tears. And then he turned, as resolute as she, and went along the road to the little house: for he had to see Ellen or he could not go. There was no light in the front of the house; only in the kitchen a faint glimmer. He halted in the road, debating his chances, and then stepped into the yard and closed the gate. He stole by the little path along the side of the house, wondering if perhaps Ellen might be in the kitchen alone and he could call her through the window. But miraculously Ellen was there before him, sitting on the steps, and she was crying with a perfect abandon to her grief. Hugh forgot his caution and hurried to her, calling her name. She rose instantly and turned a repelling shoulder to him while she choked her sobs. But he went on and stood beside her.

"What is it, Ellen?" he kept saying. "What is it?"

Now she turned to him, sufficiently outside her ordinary frame of mind to welcome, not his sympathy perhaps but the sound of a kindly voice. He remembered he was in hiding and spoke more cautiously:

"Couldn't we walk down the road a piece? I don't want your mother to see me."

"You needn't worry," said Ellen bitterly. "Mother's gone to ride."

"You alone?"

"Mother's gone to ride," she repeated, with a mounting passion. "She and Peleg Simpson."

Hugh had heard the neighborhood talk. Peleg Simpson, they said, was going with Ardelia Brock. He had been glad because, if Ellen were alone, she might the sooner turn to him.

"Don't you like it, Ellie?" he asked her.

She laughed.

"How should you like it," she inquired, "if your mother was riding out with Peleg Simpson?"

"That's different," said Hugh, and then caught himself up. His mother was another type of womankind from Ardelia Brock.

But Ellen understood him, and went on flamingly:

"You think it doesn't matter if my mother's silly — you think she looks silly anyway — you think she might as well be riding out with Peleg Simpson as not. But she's my mother, I tell you. She's my mother." The calm Ellen, who had read her graduation essay with such composure, was gone; this was the child Ellen who had unreasoning tempers and sudden remorseful sweetnesses. He loved her, at that moment, with a tenderness that recognized itself as something overwhelmingly big, and strong enough to last forever.

"Sit down a minute, Ellie," he said, "just where you were, and I'll sit on this step, and you tell me about it."

"You might as well go along," she said forlornly. "I'm going to bed. They won't be back till ten or eleven. They've gone to the beach. I heard him say so."

Her grief broke forth again, and he put out his arms to her. She turned upon him.

"Don't you touch me," she cried. "I don't want anybody to touch me but my father and my mother. No, I don't either. I don't want my mother. Long's I live I don't want her."

Hugh's arms fell. His chance of persuading her to him had quite gone. That he knew. Peleg Simpson had taken it away. At the moment he hated Peleg almost as rancorously as she did. Yet he had somehow to govern the event. He must make her feel how dear she was to him.

"Ellen," said he, "you sit down there."

And she obeyed him. But she had been crying a long time and she was tired. Hugh dropped down a step, and looked up at her.

"You told me I was always talking about running away," he said. "But now I'm going. I'm going off to Europe. Father's turned me out."

There was a satisfaction in saying it, a little swagger in telling a girl who had thought small things of him he could flaunt an adventure bigger than she had ever dreamed. It did startle her out of her tears.

"Why, Hugh Neale," said she, "you can't go to Europe. Where'd you get the money?"

"I can't tell you," he said, "because I promised. But I've got it. I'm going to-night, and you mustn't tell anybody you've seen me. Except Larry. He knows. And I shall write to you — through him, same's I write to mother."

"But people don't go off to Europe this way," said Ellen, "without telling everybody and saying good-by."

"They do if they're running away," said Hugh, still with that new sense of manliness she could not match by

any bravado of her own. "I shall be gone a long time maybe. But when I come back —" After all, he dared not say it. He could not let her hate him at the last. "Ellen," said he miserably, "when I come back I shall be just as I am now. I sha'n't be married — nor engaged — nor anything that will come between you and me. You promise me you'll be the same, just as I promise you."

"If you mean you want me to promise I won't get engaged," said Ellen, the old passion coming back into her voice and seeming, Hugh thought, almost to play about her like lightnings over a somber sky, "I can promise that safe enough. I sha'n't ever be engaged. I hate it. People get silly and put their heads on one side and tell foolish stories and expect you to laugh. I hate men, I tell you, I hate, hate 'em."

The words were like an acid eating into his mind. Never, he thought, could he forget them.

"O Ellen," he said helplessly, "you don't hate me."

"You're nothing but a boy," said Ellen. "If you grew up and talked about such things, I should hate you, same as I do the rest."

Hugh sat a minute in silence. Then he did laugh. His coming adventure, the solacing farewells he had hoped to wring from her on the sudden tragedy of parting, began to seem funny, in the main.

"Well, Ellen," he said, "I'm a boy then. I shall grow up though, you better believe, but I sha'n't be any different from what I am to-night. And you say to yourself, 'He's coming back.'" That was all he could manage, small seed of a tumultuous desire: not quite lovemaking but its faintest aura.

And it moved her, in a way; she was remorseful.

"O Hugh," she said, "I didn't mean to be aggravating. Only I hate such things so." He knew: laughing, and put-

ting your head one side. "But they don't have anything to do with you and me. And I'll write to you. Truly I will. Larry'll tell me where to send."

Her kindness was an exquisite balm, and achingly he determined to ask no more of her. Had he the restraint, he wondered, to keep this last dear moment clear of pain?

"Ellen," said he, "what you going to do?"

She knew what he meant. What was she going to do when her mother married Peleg Simpson? For the first time, she had no pride about it. Perhaps it was the easier to talk to him in the dark and parting near. It was another Hugh, snatching himself away, not remembering, in new scenes, her homely miseries.

"I guess I could get into an office," she said indifferently. "Anyway I could do housework."

This did not affront him as it might have done in another community; here housewives did their own work and were willing to "help." But his glorious idea came to him.

"Now," he said, "what should you do if you had a lot of money,— six hundred dollars maybe?"

This was the division he proposed between them. Five hundred would take him on his quest.

"I'd buy this house away from mother," said she, back again in her passion of revolt. "And she could run off and live in houses with latticed pillars and a tower, and I'd live here alone and do Larry Greene's work and read books. I guess I could do something to keep me here in this house."

"Would you take the money from me if I had it?" asked Hugh. His heart was beating terribly. "If I had enough for you and me, too?"

"'Course I wouldn't," said Ellen. At once she was removed from him in her fierce aloofness. "You needn't

talk about money. What's the use? O Hugh!" She had melted again, but it was over her own miseries, not his love. "I wish I hadn't said anything to you about mother and houses with towers. I never've told anybody. I shouldn't have thought I could."

"It's no matter," said Hugh, getting up and seeing his moment pass. He had not drunk the pleasure of it, and now the draught was gone. "Well, Ellie, it's good-by, I guess."

"Good-by," said she, readily enough. She, too, rose and came down the steps with him. They walked along the path, he in the grass beside her. At the gate his shy passion suddenly grew bold and reason failed him.

"O Ellie," said he, "couldn't you kiss me good-by?"

He waited humbly, expecting a renewed hurt. But she was kind now. She knew he was going and she meant to be gentle and good.

"Hugh," said she, "don't you laugh, if I tell you something. 'Most anybody would laugh. Ben would. So would Grissie. I never kissed any — boy. That's why I never would go where they played games — that kind. I thought if ever — I don't mean to, but if ever — I did like anybody — somebody I never'd seen you know — somebody I dream about — and he liked me, I should want him to be the first."

So she, too, had her tender, shy dreams. And he was as far from them as farthest thought, farther than the unknown lover who was coming to claim her kiss. Nothing that had befallen him — not the weeks of her silence — had seemed to him so bitter.

"Yes, Ellie," said he, at last. "You're a good girl. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Ellen softly. And then, so strange is the heart of woman and so quickly may the mother come

to life in it, that she understood, not his love for her but the forlornness of his going.

"Hugh," she said, "what makes me hateful to you?" And she leaned across the gate and kissed his cheek, with a quick shy fervor, and was gone.

In an instant he was happy and tempted to follow and tell her, among other tumultuous things, how she was to wait for him. But he knew what he should find: the savage little animal already repenting her softness and taking her revenge, not on him alone but on herself. He waited a minute and listened for her, but the place was still with the profundity of a house asleep. Then he turned about and walked half way along the orchard wall toward his own home, and paused there and sent into the night the soft hooting of an owl. Three times he did it, at long intervals, and a moment after the third time light steps came on the grassy roadside and Ben, finishing his dressing as he ran, came up to him.

"Hold on while I tie my shoe," said he, kneeling on the grass. "I was a-bed. I got downstairs in my stocking feet. I don't believe I could have fetched it then, but Aunt Tab begun a fit of coughing that raised the roof."

"I didn't think 'twas bedtime," said Hugh.

"He sent me. It's going to be a hard day to-morrow. Most likely he didn't want me on the loose for fear I'd see you. Come on in. He won't turn you out again. Mum looks like death. Come on."

"Ben," said Hugh, "I'm off. Yes, I am. In about a minute from now. And there's something you've got to do for me. Remember that six dollars you carried over to Ardelia's and made her take?"

"She took it all right," said Ben, rising from his shoelacing. "But Ellie paid it back and mother had to pocket it. Say, Ardelia's gone to ride with Peleg. Ain't that

the limit? I wouldn't be in his shoes when he teaches Ellen to say papa."

"I've got some money here," said Hugh, "and I'm going to give it to you, and you give it to Ellen and tell her she's to use it in the way she said. See?"

He was taking the roll from his inner pocket and dividing it by the feel of the bills.

"Where'd you get it?" said Ben.

"Never you mind. You do what I say, and don't you tell a soul but Ellen you've ever touched it, or you'll get into trouble. And so'll she."

"Oh, what the blazes do you want to give Ellen Brock your money for?" said Ben. They were walking on, the way Hugh had to go, and the money was in Ben's hand now. "Gorry, Hugh, you don't mean that?" He was enlightened. "You're in love with Ellen. You're engaged. Oh, call it off. What's the use? Keep your money. Give it to me and take me along with you. Don't be a fool."

Hugh whirled round upon him.

"Will you do it?" he demanded. "Will you give me your word you'll do it, and do it within a week?"

"Why, yes, 'course I will, if you say so," said Ben disgustedly. "But you're an awful fool."

"Shake hands on it," said Hugh.

They had never clasped hands in their lives, except in play. Their intercourse had been the nonchalant rough and tumble of boyhood. But Ben gave his hand, and Hugh grasped it.

"If he asks you where I've gone," he said, "you don't know."

He walked away decisively now, and Ben stood undetermined for a moment, frowning and tucking the money into his pocket. He did not think Hugh would be going

far, and he thought him a fool for going at all. So he turned back and went stealthily homeward, and Aunt Tab, hearing him on the stairs, had another fit of coughing. But Hugh, feeling that he had settled his affairs with a decision becoming a man, walked on furiously and gave himself the luxury of picturing Ellen's buying the little house.

XV

When Ben had got safely up the stairs, he threw the roll of money on his bureau and went to bed. His day in the hayfield, leisurely as he had taken it, pulled on unaccustomed muscles. All the spring the boys had had more freedom from the farm because they had their school work, and in that Neale was determined they should excel. Ben had flaunted an overwhelming amount of home study to do, even when he sat down at the table and, after his father had gone off with Trueman for the chores, took out his paper-covered novel and yawned over it. He was not absorbedly fond of reading; but it was a mild occupation, at least, when he must either sit with his books or be given a task. The boys had differing ways of escape. Hugh would run away to Larry Greene or into the deep woods with his fiddle and take his punishment when he must; but Ben could elude his father under his father's eyes.

Next morning while he was dressing he took up the money and unrolled it, and sat down, aghast. He had thought it some such sum as was commensurate with their modest uses, perhaps double the six dollars he had given Ardelia, in her trouble. But now he sat there slipping the bills and counting in a perfect daze. He swore a little, too, picturesquely. His habit of eccentric swearing always amused the boys and made him the more indubitably a leader. For he was a leader. His audacity of speech and act, his idleness they dared not emulate, his success in

escaping logical penalties, carried him far. Now, when he had convinced himself that he had made no mistake, he rolled up the bills again and slipped a band about them. Where could he put them? Mother had a way of going over the room, straightening clothes and corralling untidy treasures. She was seized with a madness for cleaning closets and setting Hannah to wash the floor. There was an old husk bed under his mattress, and he tucked the roll into one corner of it. But in another minute, when he heard his father calling, he answered hastily, and then hurried to the bed and pulled the money out. This would be the day, by some malicious fate, when mother would be moved by a desire to sun and air the husks. Now he put his booty into an old shoe in the closet, and snatched it out again because mother would take the shoe away to be mended. At last he tied the roll in a handkerchief and thrust it deep into his pocket, grinning as he did it: for he remembered a day when one of the little Gleasons had been playing about the house while the mother was helping Hannah wash blankets and Ben had, in sportiveness, stood him on his head. The Gleason boy had begged piteously not to be reversed, and rightly, for out of his pocket fell the solder he had just stolen from the barn. Ben was glad he was of sufficient height to escape betraying indignities.

When he went down to breakfast, his father and mother were both at the table and in silence. Mary looked like a beautiful pale image of some sad but exalted emotion, and Thomas bent over his plate and ate fast, regardless of her. He looked up, frowningly.

"You'll have to get up with the sun after this," he said. "Trueman an' I've done a day's work a'ready."

"I overslept," said Ben. "I don't know how it is," he added, with the smooth frankness that always made some

headway with his father, "but I'm sort of tired, now school's over. I guess studying does tire you out. You know the minister broke down."

"You go into the hayfield," said Neale. "You've had books enough for one spell."

When the meal was over, he pushed his chair back and looked at his wife. It was the first direct glance he had given her since the night of her revolt. Her heart gave a responsive throb of sick foreboding; but on the whole she was glad. Any reproach, any penalty even, would be better than his silence. The depleting effect of that was more than she felt within herself the strength to bear.

"Well," said he, as if he grudged the words, "where's he gone to?"

Mary looked at him in a pallid courage. This was, she believed, the supreme trial of her life, and she was in haste to meet it. She felt the warmth of Hugh's arms about her; but most she felt the softer touch of his baby fingers. He was something she had to be loyal to, at every expense of her own blood and sorrow, and to defend. So she said nothing. But in an instant she recalled herself.

"Ben, you run out doors," she said, as if she were sending him from his elders' troublesome controversies, to play.

Neale struck the table with the side of his hand: not an alarming blow,— only a masterful tap to bid the two remember he was governing the scene.

"You stay here. I'll ask you first. Do you know where he is?"

"No," said Ben, open-eyed in innocence. "I don't. Honest, I don't."

"You seen him since the dance at the 'Cademy?"

"No," said Ben guilelessly. "I guess he run away right after the dance, didn't he? We came home alone, you know."

Thomas believed him. He was likely to believe Ben. Indeed he was always inclined to believe everybody in direct address, because he lacked imagination to picture an actual defiance of his authority.

"Now," said he, turning his eyes upon Mary, "what you got to say?"

Mary's gaze upon him was of a liquid beauty he could not read. The past had blurred his power to scan such a page. There was warning in her look, not reproach but warning to him not to disturb the fair certainties of life too rudely. And there was love, too, perhaps not for him, since he was showing himself her adversary, but for her son.

"Thomas," said she, "I haven't a word to say."

His questions came short and gruff.

"Do you know where he's gone?"

"Yes," said Mary. The answer was beautiful in its beseeching intonation. "No farther," she seemed to be bidding him, "no farther, or you will step on sacred things."

"You seen him since he went?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I saw him after you forbid him the house." Wounded pride was in that. She did resent Hugh's banishment from the place where she worked for her sons and their father. "I called him to come in. I told you I was going to. He was out there in the dark, and I did call him."

"D'he come in?"

"No," said Mary, rather haughtily. "He wouldn't. You'd forbid him your house and he took you at your word."

"You seen him since?"

"Yes."

"How many times?"

"Once."

"When?"

"Now, Thomas," said Mary quietly, "I've answered all the questions I'm going to. If I told you anything else, you'd put two and two together and find out more'n it's well for you to know. When I have news of him, I'll tell you. But now you leave things where they are. It's best all round."

He sat silent for a moment, but the blood came into his face and purpled it, and she saw him tremble. She made a little sign of the head to Ben, to leave them; but he sat still. Ben was no coward. Something, he felt, was about to happen, and he wanted to be by mother when it came. He was excited and a little sick at the thought of it — tingling, too, with admiration for his mother. She was a great sport, he thought. Neale opened and clenched his fist that lay on the table, and once he seized the handle of a knife. But he tossed it away again. He was ungovernably angry, and the sickness of his rage appalled him. The revulsion in his nerves warned him against letting himself go. Anger had hold of him, and now prudence tapped him on the shoulder. But he had to get the mastery of his own household, and he looked up at his wife who sat there, pale, but immovably still.

"I guess," said he thickly, "if he's had enough o' this house, you've had enough of it, too."

Mary bent herself to meet his eyes. They were bloodshot, and she was unspeakably sorry for him.

"No, Thomas," said she, "I ain't tired of my home. 'Course I ain't tired of my own home. Nor my husband and children neither."

He lowered his eyes, and again he sat brooding. Ben, his hand in his pocket touching the mysterious roll, felt a

gayety of exultation. If "he" turned mother out, they would go away together and live on the roll, and Hugh couldn't blame them. They could live on it for years and have a high old time, and when it was gone, Ben would have found something brilliant and easy to do, to support them both — as easy as it had been to learn lessons with once reading them over.

Neale got up from his chair, and Mary, too, rose and stood waiting, in her calm dignity, yet with a certain deference, while he spoke.

"I forbid you to send him money."

She did not answer.

"An' I don't consider you fit to have the spendin' o' money," said Neale savagely — it was all he could think of to stab that exquisite smooth surface of hers —"for if you'll stand up ag'inst me one way, you will another. You needn't take the butter money, after this."

A little quiver ran over her face. It was an indignity to give up the income every woman of the neighborhood could claim. "When you want anything," said Neale, "you can have it charged an' bring the bill to me. An' if you beat me there, by God, I'll publish you."

He went out of the room and through the kitchen like a whirlwind, and they heard him summoning Trueman on the way to the barn.

"Come! come!" he was calling. "Hurry up. Don't be lazin' round there." And again they knew how rash he was in his anger: for no hired man of Bromley will take such words.

Mary, with her old air of dignity, was moving about the table, gathering up the plates; but though her hand did not falter, Ben knew she was all a quivering misery. He got up and put his arm about her, not awkwardly as

Hugh would have done it, but with a coaxing nicety, and pulled her to a seat.

"Trueman'll give up his job, if he goes at him like that," he said wisely. "Say, mum, where is Hugh, and how'd he get the money to go with?"

Mary Neale sat for a moment and leaned her head against her tall son. But she got up and went about her work again.

"You mustn't ask me, Ben," she said, with the dignity he knew to be a conclusive sign. "Whatever I know, I can't tell."

Ben's hand was on the roll in his pocket. "Anyway," he reflected, with his amused importance in owning an advantage he didn't need to press, "there's one thing you don't know and I do. You don't know what's in my pocket this minute."

"He's calling you," said Mary. "You better go. And do a good forenoon's work, Ben. That'll please him, if anything will."

Ben went out whistling, his hand on the roll. It gave him a high sense of elation to know he was possessed of means for untold and glorious larks. He had not been allowed to handle money, and this seemed to him inexhaustible. But he made up his mind to see Ellen and find out whether she had wind of it; then he could determine whether to give it all to her or dole it out in discreet fractions. It seemed to him a ridiculous piece of business to be wasting what must be the family money on Ellen Brock. Besides, as things were turning out, his mother might be the one to need it. Hugh would see that surely.

XVI

When Ardelia came home from her drive, she found the door unlocked and a silent house. Ellen had stayed until she heard Peleg's horse stopping at the gate, and then she unfastened the door and sped upstairs in the dark. She was in a tumult of self-pity and anger against her mother. She had not been afraid of staying alone in the house, but her hurt spirit avowed mother should not have expected it. And indeed Ardelia, coming into the darkness of the kitchen, felt an instant compunction. She had been carried away, she owned to herself, by the pleasure of seeing Peleg, and she had not guessed the drive would keep them out so late. They had lingered along the beach at low tide, and he had insisted jovially on her getting out and having ice cream at a pavilion where a rattling phonograph was playing. And Ardelia had wished, as she ate her ice cream and listened to the dance music against the murmur of waves, that Ellen had come, too, as she might have if she were not so contrary. Now she listened at the stairs. But Ellen had undressed in a determined haste, and when Ardelia went up, with her shaded candle, she was still as a little image, her eyes closed and her breathing calm and slow. Ardelia stole down-stairs sighing briefly. She had her own grievance, too. Ellen might, she thought, have been awake to hear about her good time. But in the morning nothing seemed changed between them except that the child was a shade more quiet and her sad little face drooped into more wistful lines. She hadn't much to say and Ardelia, still

hoping to make the matter of the drive a commonplace, couldn't venture it. After breakfast Ellen said she would like to go over and do up Larry's work, and her mother agreed. It was, after all, a relief to have her gone. Ardelia felt transparent to her jealous insight, and she could hardly, in the same room with her, dream about Peleg at all. Even the thought of him was like sitting beside him with Ellen shut out and perpetually fancying them in a criminal holding of hands. And after all, Ardelia did not feel criminal. She was only nervous with the discomfort of changed events.

Ellen went wearily through the woods, and she did not turn aside as Hugh had done to the violet bank where he had troubled her. It was vague to her now, what she had resented as his roughness, so many other unhappy things had come up to crowd her vision. And she was not thinking of Hugh. She was thinking of her mother and Peleg Simpson. Larry was in his front room, frowning over the fingering of a piece of music. He had been up to town to hear Kreisler that last year, and now he was, in an irritated recognition of his inadequacy, trying to practice some of the things Kreisler had bewitched him in. When he saw Ellen coming, he knew her little world had gone to pieces, but foolishly he thought it was because Hugh had said good-by to her. He called a good-morning and went on with his delightful puzzle, and after she had washed the dishes and put the kitchen in order he spoke again:

"Ellen, you come out and sit on the steps with me, or I shall go daffy in the space of one minute. I'm trying to fiddle something that won't be fiddled. You come and talk to me about moons and green cheeses and get the sound of the thing out of my head."

"Yes, I will," said Ellen; but when she would have gone

the front way he motioned to the side door where they would be in the grape-vine shadow and no one could see them from the road. Ellen was a most enchanting and pathetic mixture to him now, still a child, and yet, he was always reminding himself, grown up. She sat sedately down on the step, and Larry brought an old kitchen chair and took that, facing her.

"Ellen," said he, "you mustn't for a minute think he hasn't gone on a glorious adventure, or that he won't come back in his motor car with the band playing Hail Columby."

She looked at him in a surprised inquiry.

"Who?" she asked.

"Who?" repeated Larry blankly. "Well, who do you think? Hugh, of course."

"Oh, yes," said she, but indifferently. "I s'pose he will."

And then Larry saw Hugh was already beyond her horizon. Perhaps she had never truly seen him within it, and he was sorry for Hugh. But Ellen bent her head on her knees and began to cry.

"For God's sake," said Larry, "what is it?" In his distress, he got up and knocked over the chair on the shelving ground and stood before her and besought her. "Ellen, what is it? Don't do that. Don't do it, I tell you."

Ellen choked it down. She was not fond of crying. It came like a sudden tempest when she was unprepared. She wiped her eyes and looked up at him miserably.

"I s'pose you've heard about it," she began.

Larry shook his head.

"My mother," said Ellen, in what sounded like a rage of haughtiness, "and Peleg Simpson." It might have been an announcement of some magnificence, as if she

hung a wonderful arras to screen her own shamed heart.

Larry had scanty talk with the neighbors, but at once he knew.

"The deuce!" he said. "Well, Ellen, there's nothing the matter with him. Peleg's a good fellow."

She looked at him in an amazed indignation, and he saw, if he palliated the horror of it, he should lose her. Never would she open her defended little soul to him again. He picked up the chair and sat down in it, giving himself time to find his ground with her. She was withdrawing, he saw, inch by inch. In a moment she would rise and say she must be going, and never again would she bring her griefs to him.

"Ellen," he said contritely and persuasively, "people can't all feel alike. Don't you see? Your mother isn't made like you. She may want something — pleasant." Here he stumbled. He could imagine that, with little Puritan Ellen to keep her within bounds, Ardelia might long for the free air of irresponsible mirth such as Peleg breathed offensively.

Ellen looked at him with a rebuking coldness.

"I don't care to have you talk about my mother," she said.

Larry loved her. He adored her, in a way he owned only to his fiddle, and he couldn't lose her.

"Ellen," said he, "you're a perfect little devil. There's no pleasing you. Here am I standing up for your mother, and you tell me she's no business of mine. Yes, she is, too, because you're my business. You know perfectly well I should die dead if it wasn't for you and Hugh." Yet he knew there was no parity between the two affections. Actually he was in love with the maid in Ellen, in an old-fashioned silly way.

"I'm sorry," said she meekly.

"There!" said Larry, "I'm glad you've got some heart. Now I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. I am a Dutch uncle, really. There's nothing else I'm likely to be to you. Ellen, don't you go to strapping your mother up to impossible ideals —"

"Impossible?" flamed Ellen.

"Yes, they are. They're impossible for her. She's just a human being and she wants a good time. Now you let her have it. And if it means —"

"Don't! don't" she cried. "Don't say it."

"O damn!" said Larry, and dug his heel into the turf. Why wasn't the mother of this soft, quivering creature a woman of dignity like Mary Neale? He, too, at the moment, hated Ardelia and Peleg with an equal rage. "You see, what I'm damning," said Larry, "is the impossibility of telling you how I should hate the whole business — just as you do — and I know you're having a perfect hell of a time. But it's no use, Nell, no use." Sometimes when she seemed to him a grown woman and he jealously wanted to take her to himself in a mood of their common understanding, he called her Nell. Nobody else did it and, for the moment, he felt she was pathetically his. "You've got to take life as it is, not as you want it to be, and do the best you can with it. You'll marry yourself some day."

"No, I sha'n't," said Ellen coldly.

"Yes, you will, because you're such a darling creature a man'll make himself into anything you want him to be — at any rate, as long as he can keep it up — just to please you. And then, when you understand life better, you'll wish you'd been more tolerant, more kind — yes, just plain kind, to the poor souls that don't know anything about the great passions you were born to, and you'll wish you'd let them take their own little bite at life the

way they wanted to. You're proud, Nell, that's the matter, proud as a peacock."

"I've nothing to be proud of," she said, with quivering lips.

"Yes, you have. You're a beauty. And you're a dear. But you're a nasty little pig, too, and you're ashamed of having anybody belong to you that looks and acts like Peleg Simpson." The frown came again to her forehead, and he ended hastily: "I should, too, Nell. I should be ashamed of poor old Peleg, but I should know I ought to be kicked for it."

"Well," said Ellen, with a bewitching smile, "kick me if you want to."

She was an enchantress to him, in an undisguised way, because she was entirely at ease with him. He was an old gentleman to her, he ruefully suspected.

"God forbid," returned Larry fervently.

"But," she said, "I can't be different."

"No," said Larry, "that's it. That's a part of your wonderfulness. But can't you take things a little more —" he hesitated. Her grave eyes were on him, and he dared not invoke the reproach of their sad questioning. "You know there are lots of things to laugh at," he concluded. "Why don't you think of them, too?"

"I don't have a chance," said Ellen simply. "The other things won't let me."

It was true, he thought, poor little burdened soul. Grissie would, he suggested, to rouse some spirit in her. But Ellen looked him in the face with dignity, inquiring: "Do you want me to be like Grissie?" Then she smiled a little. She knew what he thought of Grissie.

"Anyway," said he cheerfully, "don't you be so opinionated about marrying."

He meant daringly the marriage of Ardelia, but Ellen thought he was going back to his constant rebuke of her own aloofness. She looked at him with her softest glance: for he was the nicest person, she knew, now living in this world.

"I wouldn't," she said, "if everybody was like you. I'd marry you, in a minute."

She laughed her kind little laugh and gave a convincing nod at him, and Larry laughed with her, loudly, to carry it off. Now she got up and went away out of the yard to her path across the woods, and he sat where she had left him, facing his house and staring at the vine until it seemed as if the world waved and trembled. His temptation had come upon him. She had summoned it. The bitterness of her speech lay in the innocent implication that they both knew such a thing was impossible — as she might say to her father that he was the man she would have married. She could look at him in her adorable innocence and give him the key to her heart. It was a key. For if, in her maiden distance from the desire of love, she could accept him so conclusively, what might it be if he put all his persuasive power into charming her? He had humored her like a child. What if he wooed her like a woman? She might even be deluded by a proffer of affection, unchanged from earliest remembrance, and find no hazard in it. That was a subtile snare to set for her: his sober devotion, his loneliness, her need of him. It was monstrous, he knew, a man of forty-six and a girl hardly out of childhood. But he might have heavenly hours, and then drop off and leave her in her prime, with life before her. And because it seemed impossible to bear the thought of it, of youth gone and before him none of the recompenses of age, he put the little flag out, went in and locked his doors. And when Ardelia came to cook his

dinner, she turned back at the gate and went home to tell Ellen Larry Greene'd "got another o' them times" and Ellen mustn't go near the house. Ellen stood for a moment, thinking miserably. She wondered if somehow she could have prevented it. She was just beginning, the mother spirit forming in her, to question whether Larry need ever have had to hang the flag out. She felt as if somebody might have hindered it.

Ardelia was glad to be relieved of her cares that day. She had a plan in mind.

"I guess I'll take a walk to Beckenham," she said, as if the temptation had not been signaling all night. "There's a few things I'm bewitched to buy. I s'pose you don't want to go, too?"

"No," said Ellen. "I don't want to go."

So Ardelia changed her dress and set off with a pleased importance. Ellen hardly wondered why she was going. It must, she thought, have something to do with Peleg; but she was tired of speculating. And at once, as if he had been watching for a clear coast, Ben appeared, bringing her books from the Academy, an ostensible reason, though the real one was the money in his pocket, provoking in its mystery. When she came to the door, he looked at her with quickened vision and, for the first time, it seemed to him he saw her as she was. There was reason in Hugh's madness. Ellen was a beauty. Within a year even, she had bloomed out into a peachy loveliness Ben caught at last in its perfection. But he was a master of discernment. He would never have to learn, through the adversity of rebuff, to fit himself to Ellen's rigid code. Grissie was another sort. He fathomed her by instinct, and played her way without restraint.

"Say, Ellen," he asked, "d'you see Hugh before he went away?"

"Yes," said Ellen.

"Let me come in a minute? I want to ask you something."

Ellen nodded, with a meager welcome he found piquing, and led the way into the sitting-room. Ben was afraid he was not to sit down if he waited for her to bid him, and audaciously took a chair. Then Ellen sat, too, and he asked her, fixing his blue eyes on her — Ben had a remarkable clarity of gaze —

"What'd he say to you?"

"I don't know as I can tell," she said.

The memory of it was all a mingling of her own anger over Peleg and Hugh's confused comforting. But she did remember she had kissed him, and the color flushed her face. Ben saw it and his interest quickened.

"I mean," said he, "did he say anything about me? Send me any message or anything?"

"No," said Ellen. "Not a word. Didn't you see him?"

"Only a minute. But there's lots of things he didn't tell me. I don't know where he got his money to go with. I don't believe mother knows. D'he tell you?"

Ellen looked at him with the soft clearness that showed she had nothing to hide.

"No," said she. "He didn't tell me. Not a word." Then she laughed a little. "We did speak about money. But I was the one. I told him I wished I had some. That was all."

Ben felt an instant lightness of heart and, at the same moment, a serious disapproval of chucking an unheard-of sum of money at a girl who was not even expecting it.

"What do you want money for?" he asked.

But Ellen had no idea of taking him into her discontented mind.

"Oh," said she, "I guess I could find a use for it."

"I bet you could," said Ben. "I bet we both could. Ellen!"

"What?"

He hesitated. Then he dared it.

"You engaged to Hugh?"

That enraged her, and he loved her for it.

"I'm not engaged to anybody," she said, "and I don't mean to be."

"Right you are," said Ben. "Nor I either. I never can see why a fellow and girl can't be good friends without everybody's thinking there's something in it. You going on with your shorthand?"

"I should," said Ellen, "only I haven't had anybody to read to me. Mother's been busy."

"I thought you and Grissie dictated to each other."

"We did." She hesitated. "Only now she's going in town every day and studying with the class."

"Why don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know."

But she did know. She couldn't pay the slight fee, and she knew how Grissie paid it. She had gone to Hay and Luce, the drygoods firm, and talked Mr. Luce, who had an eye for persuasive charm, into lending her the money. And when she was proficient, Luce would find her a place.

"That's just the trouble with me," said Ben. "I can't join a class. First place, father wouldn't let me. He's going to put me into Lawyer Pettis's office the first of September. But I want to keep on with my shorthand. Why can't you and I meet two or three times a week and read to each other? and if Grissie finds out any new wrinkle in class she'll tell us."

Ellen looked at him, her brows lowering and the color again flushing her cheeks.

"I won't have anything to do with Grissie," she said. "And I don't want to have anything to do with you. I saw you both, that night."

"What night?" asked Ben. She had pricked him, but he was on guard.

"The Academy dance. She ran — and you —"

"Yes," said Ben gravely. He was not looking at her. What a girl she was, he was thinking, what a prim little darling prude. "I know what you mean. I'm sorry, Ellen. I'm as sorry as I can be. Can't you forget it?"

"It isn't my business," said Ellen. "But if that's the way you feel, you and Grissie — O Ben!" Her face changed delightfully into a happy relief and confidence. "Why, Ben, I know. You're engaged to Grissie."

"No, by thunder! I'm not," cried Ben. "And don't you think it. The only trouble with me is, I haven't been half grown up. But now I see how I seem to other people — now I see how I looked to you — O Ellen, don't lay that up against me." He rose and stood before her, contrite, pleading and very handsome. "You and I could be great pals if we didn't have to think of silly things like that. With some girls you have to. They make you. Ellen, you take your book and come up to Hemlock Ridge about five. Father's going to Beckenham. And I'll come, too. And we can have an hour on our shorthand."

"Why, yes," said she. It looked suddenly pleasant to her. He was only a boy playmate and she could readily see how Grissie had shamed him into the game of folly. Woman-like, she blamed the woman. "But you come over here. We can sit on the back porch. Mother won't disturb us."

Ben made a droll face.

"Can't," said he. "Father'd find it out and then — good-by."

"All right," said Ellen. "I'll come."

It was a recognized fact that the Neale boys hoodwinked their father. No one thought the worse of them. They had to. Then he went away at once, lest she should repent, and Ellen sat down to her study rather more lighthearted. Ben was a charming playmate. And later Ardelia came back from her dusty walk to town. She was hot and disheveled, her hat on one side with the haste of her going, but she was, Ellen jealously saw, excited and happy. She carried a large bundle and threw it on the table beside Ellen's books. After she had unpinned her hat she began to cut the string with a nervous haste, and talked meanwhile, laughing a little as she went on, as if she wanted to get her explanation over. Ellen could hardly bear the laugh. It was a new one, she thought, something like Peleg's. Mother had caught it of him. But perhaps Ardelia had had few calls to laughter in these last years.

"I bought a whole cut o' cloth," said she. "'Twas a real bargain. An' some hamburg. I thought we're both pretty well out o' clo'es, an' we might's well se' down this summer an' make us up some."

Ellen looked at her in her most terrifying fashion, and Ardelia wilted under it. "Why don't you tell the truth?" Ellen was crying savagely within her own mind. "You know and I know what you're making up things for." But she only said, in a quietness of scorn that was harder for poor Ardelia to bear than the anger of reproach:

"I don't want any clothes or any hamburg. You can have it all."

XVII

It was something before five when Ellen took book and pencil and told her mother she was going into the woods. Ardelia scarcely heard, she was so busy cutting out on the kitchen table, and wondering whether the cloth ought to have been shrunk and if she could have the patience to crochet an edge. Hamburg was elegant, but it was not quite so stylish, if she could judge from the ready-made garments she had seen that day.

"Well, don't go too far," said she absently, without looking up. "Hadn't you better wait till after supper?"

Ellen did not answer; she slipped away over the stone wall and down the lane. There, instead of turning toward Larry's, she took the path to the right leading to a shaded slope overlooking a ravine where the water dashed in spring and yet mysteriously never seemed to disquiet the roots of cardinal flower. They were everywhere below among the rocks, and when she had climbed the ridge, the old devious way, she let herself down into the ravine, swinging by lithe young trees, and ran exploring over the stones in the water-course. The flowers were early, for some reason known to their private economy, the brighter for that pretty artifice of surprise. She broke their tall spikes, six of them, leaving a larger multitude to light the gloom, and climbed up again to the seat between the trees. There Ben found her, the scarlet flowers in her lap, her head against a tree bole, dreaming and looking beautiful. There was peace for her in the moment; she had dropped the thought of Peleg and something pleasant was about to happen.

The troubles that had darkened her face so long that she was in danger of carrying the mask of them in line and contour, were washed away. When she heard him, she came awake and laughed up at him and took her pencil. There were dozens of things he could have said to Grissie to begin the tryst auspiciously; but he could not say them to Ellen. He was treating her as gently as the butterfly settled on his arm. He opened his book at once, a popular novel, and told her to be ready.

"What a funny book to take!" said Ellen. She chose serious works because she had a pathetic impression that life is short and you must make use of every minute. Ellen was a little prig, no doubt, but she was a darling one.

Ben kept up the pace, and was far cleverer than she. He was always first at the game of memorizing. They dictated, turn and turn about, and after an hour of it he threw down the book and passed a hand over his eyes.

"Oh, but I'm tired," said he. "Father's had me at it this afternoon."

She was all compunction.

"We'll go straight home," said she.

"Wait a minute or two," said Ben languidly. "It's cool here. It rests my head."

"I didn't know you ever got tired. I thought you could learn anything without looking."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ben. "I guess I've had about all I can stand, with haying and things. I'm fed up with farming. I bet you are with housework."

"There isn't much," said Ellen absently. "Just mother and me."

Then they sat awhile in the cool of the late afternoon, and a thrush began melodiously. The tears sprang to her eyes and she caught her breath.

"What is it?" asked Ben tenderly.

But she hardly noted the tenderness. And she could not tell him what it was. Really it was because the thrush's song was so beautiful, and because it made her think of all her little sadnesses. She could have told Larry, but Larry would not have had to ask. Instantly she thought of him, and wondered whether she mightn't go round his way and see if the flag were out. It made her grave, yet only moderately. The flag was only a flag. She had never found Larry in his fallen estate, and the "habit" was only a habit. Now she remembered Ben, after the minute's thought away from him, and that he was asking again: "What is it, Ellen?" She shook her head, as if she cast off dark imaginings, and smiled at him. Then she told him something quite intimate, out of the depths of her defended mind. Perhaps her talk with Larry had planted the seed and this playmate game was nourishing it.

"Ben," said she, "I get awfully sick of being solemn."

"So do I," said Ben, at random.

She laughed, in a little outburst.

"You never were solemn in your life."

"You don't know how I feel inside," said Ben sagely.

But she shook her head.

"You don't feel as I do. I get so mad with people. And things. But I hate it. I'd like to laugh all day long."

"We'll laugh when we come up here, anyway," said Ben. She was too elusive for him, too fine and honest in her sweet desires. But he could at least follow her, a step behind, and catch up at intervals. "Let's pretend we've come up to play, same's we used to when we were little. Do you remember the time you and I both started

down the bank after the cardinals and our trees swung together and we bumped and fell into the drink?"

"Hugh ran down and picked me up," said she slowly. "Ben, where *is* Hugh?"

"There we go, being sober," said he. "Oh, Hugh'll be round again. Fact is, I don't know where he is."

"Don't you think Larry'd know? I meant to ask him, but we got talking."

She rose and Ben picked up his book and followed her. He did not mean to coax her. She was too shy.

"School's dismissed," said he. "Here, wait a minute. Your shoe's untied."

He knelt and began tying it and Ellen stood flushing with the discomfort of her shyness. None of the boys had ever done little deferential things for her, she was so haughty. Proudy-cat, they called her. Yet she liked having them done. It was a moving moment to see a tall boy kneeling.

"There," said Ben, "that's a double bow-knot. Race you down the hill."

He did, and beat her, and she stopped breathless at the turning of the ways. She was laughing and her cheeks were pink.

"I'm going round to Larry's," said she.

He did not offer to go, and she knew, without his saying it, that the studious hours at the hemlock were to be a secret. Thomas Neale was to be out of it.

"To-morrow night?" said Ben.

"Yes, I can. Same time. O Ben!" she called him after he had turned away. There she stood against the green of the trees where the dusk seemed to be already sifting, with such a pretty smile for him. "Ben," said she, for Ellen was all impulse and affection when you had been kind to her, "I didn't know you were so nice."

Since they grew up she had seen him with Grissie and scorned him too much to look at him. That he knew. There was an obvious answer: "I knew you were," but he didn't make it. The butterfly must not be scared. So he gave a hoot of boyish laughter and disappeared among the trees. She heard him crashing down through the undergrowth, like big game, and turned on her way to Larry's. The flag was out. She stood watching it, and then drew a step or two nearer. What if it meant Larry needed somebody more than ever, somebody to put cold water on his head or make him a cup of tea? Ellen knew nothing about the ways Larry's enemy took of overthrowing him. She stole on toward the house, fascinated by the adventure and her own lawlessness in pursuing it. The place, in its twilight quiet, seemed enchanted into a strange secrecy. She crept on up the path and stopped under the window. There she could hear something. It was heavy, regular breathing, and she concluded he was sound asleep, and that must be good for him. So she turned away, relieved, and went home. But it was well she had not seen Larry in his sleep.

That night, after Thomas Neale's supper, kept for him because he had been late in getting home, he called from the kitchen to Ben who was peacefully stretched on the sitting-room sofa. Mary, mixing her bread, also called softly because Ben did not come at once; but her husband admonished her, yet without a look at her:

"I'll tend to that myself."

Ben came drowsily and leaned against the casing.

"You can be ready to-morrer mornin'," said Neale, without looking up. "I've seen Pettis. He'll take you."

"Good Lord, father!" said Ben, between a laugh and a rueful desire to beg off. "I can't begin to study law

as you'd teach a fellow to swim. You're throwing me in neck and crop. You said September."

"You can ride to-morrer mornin'," said Neale. "I'm goin' to blacksmith's. After that, you'll walk. Come, you better be gettin' off to bed."

Ben stood in the doorway until his father went out, and made a horrible face at his back. Mary had no spirit to rebuke him.

"I'll lay out your shirt," she said. "You better wear that nice blue stripe."

Ben did go up to bed. He liked sleep, craved it like a cat, and when there was nothing else to do could throw himself down anywhere and relax every muscle in forgetful bliss. Mary went about her work, heavy-hearted and saying little inarticulate prayers for Hugh. Now that he was gone, she knew she never could have sent him if she had known what desolation he would leave. Especially at dusk, when the house was still, she wondered if she should ever see him again.

Next morning Ben, radiant in his gay certainty of meeting adequately whatever the day might bring him, came down after breakfast was on the table. Neale gave a quick upward look at him and went on eating. Hugh, Mary thought, would have been reproved for not being in time to help with the morning chores. Sometimes she believed her husband was glad of reasons for going lightly over Ben's deficiencies. A little later Trueman brought the team round, and father and son started for town. Mary stood at the door and watched them, vaguely disappointed because Ben seemed not to realize the importance of the day. Here he was going into a lawyer's office, a tremendous step, Mary and her husband thought, and he went as if to market. When he passed the little

house Ben, out of the tail of his eye, saw Ellen raking the yard. But he did not bow. He knew how father despised the Brocks, as a matter of principle even. Ellen would understand. In a minute more they saw Grissie before them, walking to her lesson. She was a gay little figure in bright blue gingham and a white hat. Her waist was slender, and she moved with a dash and bravado that made Ben think of a bird flashing along from tree to tree. Neale grunted as they overtook her. Ben understood the grunt. It meant his father disapproved of her, her bright colors and her darting ways; but it was the custom to take foot passengers in, and Neale grimly suffered it.

"Ride?" he called.

Grissie looked up at them, all one gleam of radiant responsiveness. She was ready to throw in, whatever the challenge, all the assets of her white teeth, her blue eyes and shining hair.

"Yes, indeed," said she. "I'd be ever so much obliged. Don't move, Ben. I'll hop in this side."

Instantly, with one of her buoyant motions, she had done it and was asking prettily:

"Shall I sit in the middle?"

And again Thomas grunted, and she settled herself between them like thistle-down come to rest, and, by an accident Ben accepted as one of the adroit chances she governed, dropped her bare elbow in the palm of his hand. Ben didn't particularly care about having it there; but he was amused, thinking how mad it would make father, driving morosely on the other side where there was only an arm demurely prim. When Neale had drawn up at the post-office and Grissie had said: "Thank you very much," with a propriety quite devoid of the dash and sparkle she rightly judged were not for frowning fathers,

they walked away together in a stiff propriety calculated to inform Thomas of their dearth of interest in each other. Then she did say, with a little giggle, though not looking at Ben and thereby vitiating the pious rectitude of her back:

"Where you going?"

He told her and she expressed her joy. He would be due in town every morning, and they could walk together. Ben also acclaimed this lightening of his daily burden; and that afternoon she waited for him and they dallied home along the country road. Just before they got to the little house, he left her.

"I guess I'd better drop off here," he said, and Grissie, because it was ill-advised to let Neale see them in ungoverned intimacy, approved his foresight. But Ben broke into a run across the fields and got to the Hemlock Ridge not many minutes after Ellen, and there again they had an hour's work and some laughing talk to sweeten it.

XVIII

The year was 1914, the year of the Great War, and though this is not a story of the war, it has to be colored by it as all life will henceforth be colored forevermore. Bromley was a town of old descent, it has been made plain. It gave a noble number of its sons to the Civil War and even had its little hospital in the church, where convalescing soldiers were tended by village matrons and girls and marriages were made: for the girls were all a flame of patriotism and there wasn't a copperhead within the township. Since the day when the remnant of these soldiering sons came marching home, it had been climbing up to a fair degree of prosperity. It had no poorhouse, and none of its people were, as of old, on the town. It had not been forced to take sides in violent issues. Nobody knew exactly where it stood on national questions, for it published no paper of its own and depended, to a man, upon the *County Star*, which was Republican but discreetly remembered, often enough to keep the circulation undiminished, how many of its subscribers were Democrats. Larry Greene was the only man who took the greater dailies, and he was regarded by the Rural Delivery as having a wearisome amount of mail and, if all was known, spending too much money on it.

In the latter part of June Larry had been mildly interested in learning, by way of his New York papers, that the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria and his duchess had been assassinated. He was not deeply stirred over any royal circus, nor did he want all obsolete shows to be

downed, in the interests of social democracy. He thought kings and queens were spectacular, and that the man in the street wasn't yet fitted to rule. So he dismissed the assassination from his mind. Larry had long got over his wrestle with his enemy and had hauled in the flag. Indeed it was out only a couple of days this time before he emerged, rather pale and, with a trembling hand and unhappy stomach, took up his ordinary tasks. Ellen, he thought, looked at him wistfully when she came to put the house in order, and he wondered, with a pang, if she had begun to see his temporary retirements as he did, sickened, as he was, of himself and Bromley. He thought those hours of miserable coma had helped him forget his dream of her and that he need never think of it again. But if she looked sweetly at him out of eyes uncomprehending, sympathetic and wholly affectionate, he found he had not abandoned the dream. And he felt rebellious against his age — and at the same time young. When his morning paper told him Germany had declared war against Russia, he shook his head over the intemperate issue, knowing it would run into the ever-perturbed Balkans. The English apprehension over Germany, that individual and baseless hysteria, would, he believed, crop up afresh. It was like the old scare, he thought, of Boney. And he bent over Smilie, who was coaxing him for love, and got a stitch in his back that kept him from straightening up again. Then he took, cursing, to the sofa and Smilie stared at him with reproachful eyes because he overran her part of it too, and lay there reading newspapers while Ardelia ministered to him at intervals. He forbade Ellen to come into the house. At least, he thought, she shouldn't see him in his disheveled state. The Great War has always been so connected, in Larry's mind, with a misery in his back that his angers and discomforts, his memory of sleepless nights,

always shot through with pain, meant it was something Germany had done to him. And always, remembering the tension of that tragic beginning, the short space of time stretched out interminably. When he woke in the morning he could get his steadier outlook and think of the gigantic upheaval in its proportions; but at night it was inevitably in his back as well. And one morning he woke to the certainty he never afterward lost, that something tremendous had begun and you couldn't stop it. And then came his fear that England was not going in, and if she was not, it signified that colossal wrong would have its own predetermined way, and the mother of New England was herself lost. And England did go in, and he was immediately happy and didn't mind his back, because he knew her omnipotent control over money, and he said it would be over in three months. She could cut off the flow of life to the braggart and bully, as she had done before, and the world would right itself. And he turned over on his couch and his back felt well, and he got up and took a bath and shaved and understood that Germany had been exorcised from his spine and from the world. Then the western tragedy followed, and he saw what Germany was after. This was her Day.

Now the Rural Delivery brought a letter from Hugh, with two enclosures, for his mother and for Ellen. And the story of that delayed and wandering letter makes another chapter in the anxieties of this strange year. It was brief and even vague. Hugh was so amazed at the world as he saw it from the deck, at the sea and the heavens, that his mouth was, in effect, closed. The bigness of life, the variety of it, had simply knocked him silly. Larry understood, but he wished the loosening of the bands of habit had freed other things also, and the

boy had been able to tell what he felt. One thing he did say. He had made a friend, a fellow of his own age, named Payson, who wasn't traveling second-class — no, you'd better believe not! — but who saw Hugh there one day and came and talked with him about "fiddles and things." That was all, but it sounded warm and promising.

When Ardelia next appeared she found the room set in order, the couch composed and Smilie sleeping on it with a luxurious sense of having got back her own, and Larry sitting by the window, fiddle under his chin.

"You might send Ellen over," he said, and Ardelia was willing. She was still in a maze of pleasure over the possibilities of fine white cloth.

Ellen came, bright with hope. She had missed her friend. Larry did not wait for her to begin gathering up the dishes. He gave her the letter. Ellen looked at it without anticipation, and then opened it and saw the signature with as unmoved a face. It did brighten a little perhaps, but there was no enchanted lover's flush.

"Hugh!" she said, in a mild surprise. "Queenstown. Think of his being there."

She read it and passed it to Larry to read. It was even barer in detail than his own. Hugh had had a pleasant voyage and was well and hoped Ellen was well. He hoped she would write to him and tell him everything that happened. That was all, except that after the signature there was one word, the eternally significant word burnt into human history by the fire of despairing passion: "Remember." It was scrawled in a dash with pencil, as if he had not meant to put it in but at the last moment his heart constrained him. It looked to Larry so significant that he was not going to betray his knowledge of it: but

when he had given the letter back to her she gazed at it for a moment and then turned the open page to him.

"What does he mean," she said, "by that last —'Remember'?"

Larry hesitated. He was taken aback. Could she be so much a child, so locked into her garden and impervious to the passions singing about her, that she did not know?

"What do you think?" he temporized. "I should expect you to tell."

"No," said Ellen, knitting her brows above it, "I can't think. It looks as if he wanted me to do something; but he didn't say so."

"I suppose," said Larry, "he'd want us all to remember how we felt about him, and not change toward him — you know — be just the same when he comes back."

"Maybe," said Ellen. She tore the letter into four pieces, and Larry instinctively put out a hand. "Oh," said she, "you want it? I didn't think."

Larry smiled a wry smile. There was pity in it for Hugh with his pathetic word.

"No," said he, "I don't want it."

So Ellen lifted the stove cover and dropped the letter in.

"You'll write to him, won't you?" asked Larry.

"Oh, yes, I'll write," she said, at once, and he saw what a free mind she had. "There's lots of things to tell him. I'm doing shorthand with Ben. We meet every night down at Hemlock Ridge, and we're getting on like a house-afire."

Larry looked at her and shook his head. She was beyond him. Had she none of the instincts or the trained anticipation of her sex?

"Ellen," said he, "don't you tell him that."

"Why?" asked Ellen, looking at him with an untroubled brow.

"It'll make him homesick as the devil. You wouldn't like it, if you were miles and miles away, to have anybody talk about Hemlock Ridge and know you couldn't get there."

"Not when he's got so many better things?" said Ellen. "What's Hemlock Ridge to be homesick for?"

"Wait till you've tried it. No, you just tell him what you do and what your mother does, and when you've seen his mother and me. But don't you talk about Ben and make him think Ben's in clover."

"All right," said Ellen. It evidently mattered neither one way nor the other.

And Larry opened his paper and began to read. The gray-green hordes of Germany were marching across Belgium with their horrible singing, and as he read he shuddered in his inmost soul. Where the last intimate self of him lived, he was afraid. The great fear came upon him that fell at that time upon all Americans whose hearts and eyes were not holden from the compassion and the honor of life. He still knew the war would be over in three months, but he was aghast at the choice of deliberate evil. Perhaps, having no task of his own to do for the struggle, he was the calmer to use his perspective in balancing the forces of it, and the world suddenly seemed to him an evil place. He had believed, like the rest of his kind, in what it called civilization; but the gray-green hordes marching convinced him that there was no such thing — only a word. There could really live and fatten and exercise itself, to give itself strength, a monster like Prussia, which had planned the evil and rushed singing to accomplish it. There must be then, he thought, definitely and conclusively, hell. We had laughed at the devil. We had said sin was only ignorance and wrong choices. But all the time evil had been battening in fair places,

and now it was so sure of its colossal power that it could sing. Ellen, at her task, was singing a little, low, under her breath, not to disturb him, and the sound of it hurt his torn nerves, thinking of that other gigantic chorus of the willful murdering of life.

"Don't!" he said irritably, and she looked at him and, at the sight of his face, ran to him and begged him to tell her what had happened.

"The Germans," he told her, "are marching across France. They may be in Paris now."

"Oh!" said Ellen. She did not understand. He looked at her absently. She filled his vision as a figure dear to him but not significant in this world-crisis. For a moment it seemed to him it was idle talking to her. Paris was a city on the map. Then a hot wave of feeling took him, and he knew she had got to be dragged in. Everybody had got to be dragged in. She could not be saved from being frightened, like him, by the plain fact that the devil had, in the old phrase, broken loose. She must not be saved. Nobody must be saved. We were all part and parcel of grotesque and colossal ill.

"Ellen," said he, "sit down here. No, no,— leave the dishes. Throw them out of the window, if you can't leave them."

Ellen, with a scared look, wiped her hands and sat down by him and waited. She was near enough to the sofa to put her hand on Smilie's satin head, and the touch gave her a homely comfort. Larry looked at her a moment, and the tears came into his eyes. What had he to tell her? What did he know except that the devil had broken loose? But he had to speak. He had, indeed, to prepare for himself a protagonist, an understanding mind to whom he could unfold the great terror.

"Ellen," he said, "Germany has been preparing for

it for years and years. England has known it, but she's been stuck in her bog and she wouldn't believe her prophets. France knew it. And now it's come, and the devils are falling on Paris, and while I sit here and cry it's happened maybe — it's over, and they are marching through the streets singing their barbarian songs."

He was making as deep an effect as he could have wished.

"Have they taken Paris?" she asked, in awe. But the awe was for the bigness of it, as he was showing it to her, and not yet any conception of her own.

"Not so far as we know. But maybe, yes. Maybe the news has come since this paper was printed. But what's knocked me down and what's got to knock every American between the eyes, if he's got a drop of the old blood in him, is that the devil's broken loose. It isn't that it's a quarrel; it's that the black side has shifted to the top — and who's going to put it under?"

"Will Hugh come home?" she asked.

He had not thought of Hugh.

"God knows," he said. "At least, he won't go into Germany. They're organized, every man of them, for their big play. They won't be taking little American boys in to study fiddling. Can you see his mother? Can you give her this letter from him? I oughtn't to have delayed it a minute, but this devil of a war's got hold of me."

Yes, Ellen said, she could slip over across the orchard, though she never liked to do it when Mr. Neale was there. So Larry gave her the letter and she went away, her heart full of trouble. And excitement, too. Youth is not dizzy when the world is upside down. She did get the letter to Mary Neale, after she had seen Thomas go by to the lower pasture, and Mary, a great

excited wave creeping over her, snatched it and stood there trembling all through her majestic height. Ellen had never seen her or any woman look so. It came to her, like a fiery baptism, what it is to be so loved. And then Mary's face broke divinely into a sweet smiling, and she kissed Ellen, all a rapture of gratitude for her bringing it. Ellen went away trembling with a little bliss of her own from the touch of those soft lips. Mary Neale always seemed far removed from the intercourse of neighborly life. Ellen felt she herself was different because Mary had bent to her: she must, it seemed then, be different always. Nobody in the neighborhood was like Mary Neale, remote and yet so gracious. Everybody felt that.

Mary sat down and read her letter. It was a darling letter, a child's letter almost, full of little details of what he thought she would want to hear, about the ship, about the look of the sea. Mary had been born near the coast, and she felt he was remembering that. She knew, too, that all the careful pictures of the strange life he was living were exquisite flowering of his thought of her, the unspoken acknowledgment of the love he knew she had for him, something bloomed out of that last night. And at the end there was a little awkward postscript for Aunt Tab. He couldn't tell, he said, how much he knew he owed to her. Mary took the letter upstairs at once and laid it in Aunt Tab's hand. Tabitha was sitting by the window in her strange négligée, waving a palm-leaf fan and looking far away over the maple tops to an invisible sea; and she too laid hold of the letter in wonder and delight and Mary left it with her. That night Tabitha gave it back to her, and neither spoke of it. But their faces glowed.

When Ellen went home, she looked at Ardelia, rocking by the window and sewing a white seam, with a wonder proportioned to her delight over Mary Neale's kiss. She had never in her life consciously compared Ardelia with other women; but now as she saw her in the pathetic trappings of her middle-aged frivolity, her hair waved tightly and her face lighted by that smile of fatuous anticipation, she had a hurt feeling that was not wholly scorn. She longed to cover her with some mantle that should hide Ardelia's foolishness, not only from her own offended eyes, but most from other people.

That night she woke in her little bed under the eaves, shuddering with the terror of life. Larry had frightened her with his nightmare of the vulture evil swooping on the dead bones of the world, and Ardelia seemed so far from her and so unlike anything you call mother that she was in a panic of loneliness. She bore it as long as she could, the dark pressing down upon her, and then sat up in bed and stared into the murk. Ardelia, sleeping soundly because she had that day sewed herself out, as she said, woke a minute after this to a step at her bedside, and threw back the clothes to the little shuddering form. Ellen crept in, sobbing, and threw her arms about her mother, splashing her with tears.

"There! there!" Ardelia kept saying, and hugged her close. She had been lonesome, too, not lonesome enough to give up Peleg for a naughty Ellen, but quite unable to see why young folks would not live and let live. Now she was in a mother glow of getting her child back, and Ellen threw off all restraint and spoke to her tumultuously:

"Promise, mother!" This was the burden of her wild entreaty. "Only promise you won't. I'll do anything.

I'll work, soon's I can get a place. I'll buy you things. You wanted a summer silk. You said you did. Oh, if you don't promise, I shall die."

Ardelia knew quite well what she was to promise. She was to have no more to do with Peleg Simpson. She was to settle down and be an old woman and give up living in the house with the latticed pillars. And sometime Larry Greene would drop off "with them spells he had," and then where was she going to earn a cent for either of them? And as for Ellen's earning, it was all very well to talk about it, though it was in the air as yet. But all the time she held Ellen close and said, "There! there!" and Ellen redoubled the torrent of her persuasion.

"I could earn lots of money," she was urging passionately. "Maybe I'm 'most ready for a place now, but if I leave this house, he'll come." It was chaotic betrayal of her terror over Peleg's imminence. If he was her mother's dream, he was Ellen's nightmare. She was perpetually anticipating, speculating, fearing. All the summer she had been a prisoner to her apprehension. "I could go to Boston and get a place in an office, and you could come, too, and board and"— here the old country phrase came out —"never put your hands into water."

"I dunno's you'd like to live in a city all the time," said Ardelia tenderly. "You're terrible fond o' the woods, an' you know how you felt about sellin' this house. I dunno why you're so set against stayin' round here somewheres an' livin' better'n we're livin' now. Mother wouldn't listen to a plan, Ellie, that left you out, nor she ain't had to." And then Ardelia's evil fate, the fate that lies in a clumsy mishandling of the tools of intercourse, struck sharply out before her mental vision the house with the latticed pillars, and she blundered on:

"He's got money in the bank, an' it's a real pretty house."

Ellen's arms relaxed. Her sobs ceased. She, too, saw the house with the latticed porch and Peleg joking and cackling his welcome from its shadow. She slipped out of bed and left Ardelia's clinging arms. And Ardelia did suffer, in that instant, as much as she could. She called Ellen's name and then, when the bare feet went flying up the stairs, turned on her pillow and cried a little, in her own fitful and tepid way. She was sorry Ellen must act so. But she thought, at the moment even, of Peleg's kindliness.

But it was only a day or two after this that Ellen found a deliverer. This was Sally Wheeler. The story of Sally Wheeler and the war is like innumerable other dramas played between the individual and that monstrous upheaval, big enough for tragedy's colossal strains. This fine old New England spinster, a confusion of contradictory traits, cool with a touch of acid and hot as the scent of roses, a man's grasp and a woman's insight, this creature who had governed her inner life so jealously that no one knew whether it contented her or drove her mad — fought in the war with the ardor and self-abandonment of the consecrated patriot. She went about from town to town, unwelcome, unsupported, save by a decorous respect for her name and county standing, she made speeches even in the streets, and in schools, and, it was said, more than once in the saloons. And always her cry was that men were deceived and would be in the end undone, that they were the prey of the politician and the dreamers and that if they did not shortly awaken it would be too late. She saw America personified, as in a vision, and painted the picture of her manacled by those who were sworn to her defense until men grew pale sometimes and looked serious, and opined it was our war after

all. She organized little groups for "relief" and started classes in the cottage hospital at Beckenham — this also her foundation — for First Aid.

"We don't know what we're going to do with all this," she said to the girls she persuaded into it. "But something's going to happen, and we've got to be ready and get ready now."

Larry told her the frank cursing she did over the laggards and time-servers would sink a ship. She didn't answer. She went about, bright-eyed, untiring, and against hope tried to whip mankind into the ranks of moral decency.

To-day, on her way home from Beckenham, not with Henry this time but the more compliant colt, she overtook Ellen at her own gate, just going in.

"Wait a minute," called Sally Wheeler. "Wait a minute, my dear. I want to speak to you."

Ellen came back into the road again and looked up at her out of the half-terrified admiration all Sally Wheeler's townsmen had for her. At this point in her life and in the world's life they never knew what she was going to command them to do next. Ellen was sad-eyed to-day, but the cold had brought her a flush and Sally Wheeler thought, with an appraising glance, how strong she looked.

"My dear," said she, "I've had my eye on you for a long time. The fact is, I want you."

"Yes," said Ellen, coming a little nearer.

She knew why Sally Wheeler wanted everybody now. It was in some way for the war, and she was ready. Larry had taught her she'd got to answer when she was called.

"What do you do?" asked Sally Wheeler bluntly. "Do you earn anything?"

Ellen drooped perceptibly. She couldn't explain that she was a poor little daughter who ought to be earning but hadn't tried because she had to stay at home and watch her mother and Peleg Simpson.

"I can do shorthand," she said primly. "Not very fast, but I'm studying every day."

"Come into my First Aid class," said Sally Wheeler. "Come three days in a week, and I'll pay you for 'em. You're a good strong girl and I want you."

Ellen thought she saw a door opening into a place of light and herself running through.

"Could I?" said she. "Could I be of any use?"

"You can learn to be," said Sally Wheeler. "You can take down some letters for me, too. We'll see what we can make of you. You know about the war, don't you? Larry's talked to you?"

"Yes," said Ellen. "I know."

"You know we ought every one of us in this country to be mobilized this minute, don't you? You know we're dead and damned if we don't go in — there, forgive me, my dear. Don't swear — at least till you're over sixty and there's another war. Well, you ask your mother and come to see me to-morrow at three."

And Ellen did go to see her and proudly got her orders for the war.

XIX

The story of Larry, through a long following time, repeated the anguish of his response to the war. He had said it would not last three months. He had confidence in the deterrent opinion of mankind and in the financial weapons held by a great country. And gradually, as knowledge foreign to our expectation comes, and suddenly at last when the sum of it burst upon him, he realized that it was not ending, and that the cup of blood and tears would overflow. And so predominant in his mind was the vision of the evil he had thought buried with reptilian monsters in the slime of the past, that he saw the earth as polluted and the sky darkened. He had curious fancies in these days. When a little epidemic of colds swept over Bromley, he saw the earth infested by strange germs, the product of opening the doors of life again to the festering under-world, and had to recall himself to sanity by saying over and over again that it was only a cold. It had been all a monstrous irony, he thought, this progress toward a God who seemed, in the puerile eyes of striving mankind, to be more or less pleased with us. We had assumed He was pleased. We were stamping down the evils we considered hostile to Him and finding out His remedies. And then the shock, the jolt, that threw the world back into that sector of its orbit where the airs were miasma and the creatures bred in it ready to swoop with vulture wings. He took to going out among the neighbors, to their great surprise and not over-ready welcome. He wanted to taste public

opinion, and it seemed to him that they, shaken back into a former state of mind — the mind of old New England when it had to set itself to repelling danger — must have laid hold on an old godly sanity. The first day of his pilgrimage he actually went to see his brother who had been estranged from him for all the years since their early quarrel. They had exchanged some sort of greeting when they met by chance, the squire a grunt and Larry a satirical salute of two fingers to his hat; but that was all. It was with no idea of consummating peace because war had become so horrible that Larry sought him out. It was because he longed incredibly for the communion of the old New England spirit in these days of an evil greater than a revolting New England ever knew. He had gone to Boston, from time to time, and poked about among editorial opinion, and come back slightly comforted by universal and outspoken rage against the enemy of mankind. But he wanted the comfort of his own blood.

It was a day in early winter and Clara was sitting by the window, mending, while the squire, at the fireside, changed his boots. They had put in the fireboard and the coal base-burner, and the room was humming with heat. Meager as were the squire's ideas of comfort, he always yielded to his wife's wish for the highest temperature. He was a man of languid circulation and inclined himself to be cold. Hot tea and a base-burner were the conditions of his well-being until the sun rode high. Clara, rocking, gave an exclamation,— of alarm, it might have been.

"If there ain't your brother," said she, "comin' up the path."

This was after the savage cold that had attacked the neighborhood, and the squire's thrifty fancy flew to that.

"If he's got sickness comin' on," said he, "an' thinks

he'll settle down on me to be took care of, he'll miss his guess."

Clara was peering over her glasses at the hurrying form. She had begun to wear glasses that summer and they slipped her along a decade at least, into a plump yet unlovely age.

"No," said she, "he don't walk as if he's sick. Why, he ain't been into this house —"

There she paused, for Larry had opened the outer door and stepped in. It was a masterful entrance, yet a natural one. He could not conceive of knocking at a door that had through all these later years been free to his spirit, though actually barred to him. As his eye lighted on Clara, he laughed out. He never could get over the idea of her as the tragic element in his life. The laugh gave his advent something of cheerfulness, and she was wholesomely glad. She had thought a great many times what good company he used to be and how folksy it would seem to have him run in once in a while. Larry, with that first glance, noted the grotesqueness of the base-burner among the fine old furniture, and that made him laugh again. He nearly winked at the furniture, to show it he understood, and thought he might whisper to it, if he had a chance, that he knew it had fallen on evil times and the disgrace of vulgar company. But he had his question to put, and he did not propose to sit down, unless Abial should answer comformably, with the righteousness of old. Then it would show that Brother Abial had cracked in places, that his crust was bursting, and that the fragrance of the spirit might steal out through the hide of habit.

"Well," said he, "what do you think of the war?"

Abial sat there, one shoe held in his hand, the stockinged foot ready for it, and looked up at Larry. How

beautiful the line of his profile was, tragic inheritance from some ancestor who mysteriously could not transmit also the emotions that must at some time have lived behind that dignified exterior, Larry saw. Yet, Larry told himself, Abial had done things to his face since he had had the molding of it. He had shut the mouth to a line of repression, he had invited a glint of suspicion into the eyes. They were always asking questions. "What are you trying to get out of me?" they said so habitually that they said it now, and Larry saw it.

"The war?" said he. "I care nothin' about the war. What's the war got to do with me?"

"Do you read the papers?" asked Larry softly. He knew now what kind of man he had before him. Brother Abial was as far from seeing the spirit of evil as if it had never threatened. But Larry did not speak softly to persuade him to a better frame of mind. He was subduing himself because he didn't mean to offend until Brother Abial had betrayed himself entirely.

"Yes," said Abial, "'course I read my paper."

The argument might have been that he should scarcely be such a fool as to pay for a paper and not get his money's worth by reading it. Abial continued to look at his brother, frowning now as if something perplexing were required of him and he might as well answer it. "I figure," said he, "it can't hurt us. I don't see's we shall feel it much. We raise our crops, an' anyway we shall have enough to eat. I s'pose there's a good many'll make considerable out of it. Anyways, we ain't got to think about it. Them that's at Washington are thinkin' for us. It's no concern of ourn. We're goin' to be neutral."

"Yes," said Larry, "I suppose we are — some of us."

He turned away and laid his hand on the latch, and he

did want a few minutes' unhindered talk with the furniture which had still to live with Brother Abial and couldn't run out on its four legs and find sanctuary, or at least the holocaust of cleansing fires.

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Clara, with an overflowing cordiality. "I guess you could set a spell if you only thought so."

Larry turned and, to her confusion — though she really liked it and thought of it afterward with a perplexed inquiry — made her, hat in hand, a sweeping bow. He was thinking of old romance. Love poems flooded his mind in a brimming ecstasy of laughter, old lovers were before him in the overheated room. This was she to whom he had consecrated his youth and the heart of his youth, and she was large and soft and she was urging him to "set a spell." He did not answer otherwise, but got out of the room with a sense of escape and pelted down the drive, laughing. Clara heard the sound of it and yet concluded it could not be since there was nothing to laugh at, and Squire Abial returned to lacing his boot.

"What do you think?" she began, and the squire gave an indeterminate sound, half snarl and half repudiating word.

"I dunno," said he, and then an old bitterness broke bounds. "He never was half baked."

That same day Larry met Gleason in the road, and put his question. Gleason was in an unctuous humor, for Grissie had earned ten dollars in taking down a sheriff's notes, and she had magnificently turned it in to the family exchequer and they were all rotund with sausages. Gleason stopped before Larry and lifted the back of his cap while he scratched his head.

"Why," said he, "I s'pose they know what they're fightin' for. Germany's a pretty big country an' I under-

stand she's got to expand." The word pleased him and he felt the exhilaration of intellectual life and repeated it. "Got to let 'em fight it out. They'll get sick enough of it," he announced smilingly, and with his reminiscent mind really on sausage. "Got to let 'em fight it out."

But Larry, as he walked away, had another of his queer obsessions, where the unseen of life shoulders in among tangible things, and he thought he saw Gleason, moving jauntily along, clouded by something black at his side. That, Larry knew, was the shadow of evil, and even Gleason would have to walk in it until it had been wiped away from the earth. That spurred Larry to his toughest encounter yet, and he went on to the little wind swept house on a bare hill, to see the minister. It was long since the minister had come to see him, because he was an old-fashioned man who dwelt in a system of theology as tight as his skin, and he had concluded Larry was a blasphemer. But he received him as a guest, even tremulously opening the door to him and drawing him into the sitting-room which was study and family meeting-place as well. And there sat a woman, small, slight, needle-like in the sharpness of her discontents and resistances, piercing Larry with a glance, as he came in, and then bending over her work and saying no more than the word of greeting. But she did, he thought, as he absently watched her, stab the innocent stocking with a truly murderous intent. He thought no stocking deserved such an onslaught, even if it had got itself worn out unduly. Then he put his question, and the Reverend John Peterson, standing by the stove — again a base-burner, but thriftily run — practically delivered the whole of the peace sermon he had been thinking out when Larry came. He was a tall, spare man with eager, bony hands and burning eyes, an ascetic face, the yellow skin tight

over it. His sparse black hair he wore rather long, out of some inherited belief that it was the more suitable to his calling; and Larry, sitting there and watching the stabbing needle, thought how strange it was that this fanatical temperament should be hotly, even vindictively, preaching peace. He concluded the preacher was delighted to rehearse the incomplete sermon.

The peace of the Reverend John Peterson was the peace of those who have convinced themselves that nothing is worth fighting for. They have belied the gospel of their Prince of Peace until the word even makes them drunk with ecstasy. Gradually Larry found that he was not listening. His mind was slipping more and more from the spell of the pathetic falsities and the misconceived idealism; he had raised his eyes from the stabbing needle to the face of the woman who bent over it. He thought he had never seen a face so unmoved and at the same time possessed by such a fury of revolt. He dreamed into it the deeds of other women who had rebelled, and he could see her with the dagger of righteous anger stabbing the new leaders of evil and piercing them to the heart. As the Reverend John Peterson warmed to his sermon, the oldest boy came in, tall, like his father, the fanatical black eyes belied by a warm, generous, beautiful mouth. He turned to the window and looked out while the sermon went on, and Larry imagined into his back the revolt he had seen in the mother's face. When the sermon slackened in flow, as if the preacher had perhaps not thought it out to the end, Larry rose and sidled toward the door.

"It's not so, Peterson," he said, in his gentlest voice. "You're all wrong, you know, wrong from beginning to end. If you had your way the whole show'd go to pot — your show, I mean, right and wrong and all that. No, you've got all mired up."

The preacher turned upon him in a very human resentment. He resented being called Peterson in that way. It was undervaluing the cloth. And though he was not used to being listened to, he was also not hardened to being withstood. But Larry had slipped out at the front door, and saw then that the tall boy had snatched his cap and followed him.

"Hullo," said Larry. "Where you bound?"

They went slipping down the wind swept hill together.

"I thought I'd tell you," said the boy. He was breathless with his own eagerness. He had great trust in Larry. Most of the boys, though they were not allowed to play with him, had that admiring confidence, perhaps through Hugh who had managed to evade the edict. "I'm going to run away. To Canada. To enlist."

Larry looked at him, the face set eagerly forward, flushed richly now by the blood of youth. He was like his father indeed, yet how different. The great ideal had not got clogged in him by weakness and imaginative lack. He was working it out through his own hot desires.

"How old are you?" asked Larry.

The boy faced him with a smile on the beautiful lips. Larry could not help thinking the lips were something his mother had given him. They were not hers, but she had dreamed them.

"I shall be twenty-one," he said, "when I get to Canada."

"Mr. Greene!" came a breathless voice behind them. It was the mother, running to overtake them, and, in her light slenderness and the flush on her cheeks, not like the woman who had sat at her stabbing work. They waited for her, the boy kindly but disconcerted. Larry took off his cap and she came up to them, panting.

"Eddy," said she, "you better go back."

Larry knew why, and perhaps Eddy did, too. Peterson would not have considered such company wholesome for the young. Eddy turned sulkily, but without demur. His moment was ruined anyway, by mother's coming. Perhaps his life was not thereafter the same on that account: for Eddy never did go to Canada. Nor did he seek out Larry again. It may be there was something in the temperament behind the fanatical eyes that told him it was God's will for him to yield. But the mother stood there panting on the wind swept hill, and drew the apron she had caught up the closer about her shoulders. Larry looked at her and pitied her for the cold of her inner life which was more deadly than all the force of all the winds.

"I wanted to ask you," said she, "where you think I can find out how to knit? Sponges they call 'em, to soak up the blood. I could do it minutes when I get time; but of course they want 'em to be just right. I saw something about it in the paper, but it didn't give the rule."

Larry knew even less of knitting than he did of war, but he answered instantly:

"I'll find out for you, Mrs. Peterson. And I'll buy the stuff, if you'll let me. I'll pay for it and you knit it up." For he knew the Reverend John had no money to spend on knitting cotton.

She looked relieved and thankful.

"That's nice," said she. "I thought I could ravel out a spread I've got. Mr. Greene!" Her face came to a point of earnest and even savage determination. It was not that color ran into it, but it seemed to tighten all over with an extremity of pain. "I know how you feel. I want to tell you I feel just as you do. If I was a man, I'd do something."

She turned, and went running up the windy hill, putting her head down as if she were butting the gale and planting her feet like some little sore beset animal that had to run its claws into the earth to keep from being dragged up from it by an enemy of the air. Larry went thoughtfully homeward. He decided not to challenge Thomas Neale about the war, lest Neale should ask him what he knew about his son.

He found Ellen sitting in his house, the fire burning brightly and Smilie by the hearth, twitching in imagined raids and only jumping up to give him a dash of welcome and plumping down again to go on with her dream. Ellen was finishing his week's mending. She usually did it at home, but this time something had escaped her. He stood a moment in the doorway and looked at her, his heart greeting her before his lips: for his lips could never hail her as his heart would like. She looked up at him and smiled, the quiet housewife smile ready for the returning man who is worked for so absorbedly that there has been scant time to miss him. Again Larry's besetment came upon him. Was he too old to paint the love she had for him so bright that it would lead her into the path that never ends? Or, since she was a woman now, though so young, should he tell Ardelia to come to do his work because he found Ellen too glamorously sweet? Bromley would never call their intimacy unfitting. He was not good company for boys; but otherwise he was an ascetic and he was old.

"I had a letter from Hugh," she said, at once. Hugh had begun to write his mother and Ellen now, not enclosing under cover to Larry. In the beginning Neale's influence had looked pervasive enough to put out a long arm and snatch him home again.

"I did, too," said Larry. He threw off his coat and sat down, suddenly tired. Hugh's letter had made him old.

"Well," said Ellen, "he's done it. He's gone into the Foreign Legion. You hoped he would."

"Didn't you?" asked Larry.

"Yes." As to the war, Ellen was the echo of his mind. He had opened it freely to her. He had told her all he knew about the aspects of it, and together they read the papers and studied maps. He had talked to her daily about the rebirth of evil and his terror of it, and she had gravely listened. "But I suppose he wouldn't have done it so soon maybe, if he hadn't met the other young man going over and he went in. And you see he says if there hadn't been any war he was going to work for the other young man — be his chauffeur — think of it! Why do you s'pose?"

"Because," said Larry, in a violence of triumph over the way Hugh was coming out, "it was the first time he'd run up against the real stuff in a fellow his own age. And he saw he'd better drive a car and be honestly paid for it — for a while anyway, till he'd got hold of himself — than muddle along with this fiddle business — on Tabitha's money. Do you want to read my letter?"

She nodded.

"I'll leave you mine," she said. "I brought it over." So Larry knew that still she had no tenderness for the letters, or that Hugh was managing to keep his heart out of them. "You read yours to me," said Ellen, with her fascinating air of being too busy to pause, "and I'll finish this."

Larry got the letter out and read it, one of those authentic simple testimonies to the beauty of youth, dated somewhere in France. Hugh had decided at once to go

in, when he found his friend was going. He had left his fiddle in a London lodging house.

"He never'll see it again," said Larry. "Because he never'll want to."

"What makes you say that?" asked Ellen, looking up at him.

"I never've told you my theory of Hugh and the fiddle. His fiddle is youth. He's a terribly emotional chap, poetic kind of chap, too. Life affects him. It's almost cruel the way it knocks him, especially while he's so young he doesn't know what to make of it. He heard me play the fiddle, and it was the best thing he'd had. So he thought the relief for all these things that were making him burst was the fiddle, every time. But it wasn't the fiddle at all."

"Do you suppose Ben feels that way?" asked Ellen. She rested her hand on her knee and looked dreamily out of the window.

"Ben?" said Larry violently. "Ben's got nothing inside him. Hugh's a man."

"Oh!" said Ellen. She looked mildly surprised, but that was all.

Larry went on reading the letter, and again she stayed her hand and listened. Hugh had never written to her like this. The letter was full of the emotion, unspoken indeed, that comes from the recognition of life. He did not indulge it, he did not wallow in it; but it quickened the pace. The whole thing was throbbing with color. The look of the world, the hard service, the necessities of the time, were delivered pat as blows. The pictures he gave, in a paragraph or two, of the vineyards, the harvest fields and hamlets, the blue Pyrenees topped with snow and the poplar trees of France — these were marked with the rarest distinction of simplicity.

"You see," said Larry, at the end. "That's English. His gift is words."

"Do you mean," said Ellen, again bewildered, "he can write?"

"Yes. He will write. Not now, maybe. But he'll have to, in spite of himself."

"Well," said Ellen, "now you read my letter."

It was no such matter as the other. It was all a shy solicitude over her, but it gave her none of him. Larry wondered as he read. Was she, too, like the fiddle, a matter of his seething youth, and might his mind's eyes be presently filled as bewilderingly with a maid of France?

"Yes," he said ineptly, handing the letter back. "And now, Ellen, you've got to buy me a cartload of the right sort of yarn and copy the receipt for knitting things — 'relief,' you know. And I'll hand them over to Mrs. Peterson. And I will also chuck a few commas into this letter of Hugh's and wipe out the personal tang and send it off to a New York paper."

And though he believed in the beauty and worth of Hugh's prose — miraculous, it seemed to him, since the boy had had no training — it was a double marvel when the big New York daily did accept it, paid for it and asked for more. Larry stared at the check as he never had at his own in the early days when print was a wonder to him, starting out in fire from the mists of youth. He showed it to Ellen, and she was solemnly impressed. She saw Hugh in another light, not perhaps through persuasion of the check but because an authoritative journal could pay him for the unconsidered marshaling of facts he was at liberty to use and his wonder over the tragic beauty of the face of France. And Mary Neale! the check was shown her before it began, in another form, its journey to Hugh, and the printed column and a half of

his letter she presently knew by heart. She read it to Neale, timorously prefacing it with the explanation that it was written with no idea of print — for she could not tell whether mysteriously it might not be an offense. Neale listened from his cordon of silence perhaps intently: for she fancied his eyes were fixed in somewhat deeper scrutiny.

"Shall I read it again?" she asked, another day.

But he looked impenetrable and she did not venture: not until the next letter came and the next. And all of them, with a hardihood she wondered at, she read to him in turn.

To Aunt Tab the printed words were a debauch of happiness. She hardly knew what they signified: only that they were print. They connected Hugh, in some undefined way with the entire world of books and magazines, chiefly Godey's. And she was, in consequence, happy. It seemed to her the unimagined deed would never have been accomplished if she had not sold her lot.

XX

It was incredible to Aunt Tab, and to Mary Neale, in a lesser degree, that Neale escaped all knowledge that the wood lot had been sold. For the first few days after Hugh's going, Aunt Tab sat with hands folded in her lap, unable to essay even her mild hidden recreations. Momently she expected her brother's step on the stair and his voice bidding her tell all she knew. But the call delayed. There were times when she even began to fold her clothes in anticipation of exile; but Mary Neale, coming in one day to bring a warm cooky from the baking, saw the piles on the bed and knew what they meant.

"Don't you do that, Tabitha," she said calmly, and her upright pose and the resistance that informed her made her the more majestic. "You are entitled to your home here. Don't you forget that."

Aunt Tab tittered a little, from pure nervousness.

"Anyway," said she, "if I was turned out o' the house —"

"You can't be," said Mary. "And if you are, we'll take our time and go comfortably."

Tabitha stared at her in a terror as overwhelming as her gratitude. Did Mary mean she would go, too? Tabitha was not prepared for so complete a partisanship. Mary did not explain. The high mood of Hugh's going had lasted, and she was not afraid. But as days went on and the mood lowered in temperature, as moods will, though the certainties behind it were unchanged she, too, trembled before the anticipated moment. The longer it was deferred, the greater power did it exercise, tapping

away at the outworks of her defenses. If Thomas walked into the house in greater haste than usual or with a darker brow, she said to herself, "It has come," and dropped whatever she was doing to stand up and face him. But he would go past her to the water pail or tool drawer, and then out again, absorbed in his own quests. And at last these alarms were so disquieting to her that she would sit down a while, afterward, and try to still her tremors. And it was all quite simple. No neighbor spoke to him about the lot because no man would willingly rouse him, and no one had the invention to dream Aunt Tab could have acted without his knowledge. It was known that Hugh had run away, and this raised a house-to-house visitation of women carrying the news. Grissie was said to have started it, and she got it from Ben. It was Ben, too, who had come on the notice of the recorded deed one day while he was in the post-office running over the weekly paper and waiting for Grissie, to walk home. Now in a flash he understood where Hugh had got his money. He crumpled the paper and threw it into a corner, not that so simple a device would hoodwink his father in the end, but instinctively keeping up the conspiracy of silence Neale made inevitable.

Grissie and Ben walked along happily one day and got chaffing each other by the great pine where there are no houses — Grissie always roused him here to some height of fun or temper and Ben idly knew why and met her gayly — and she slapped him with her blank book, and he caught her and kissed her, knowing it was expected of him. Grissie clung to him after the kissing. She never had before. She had made him feel it was a game she was not especially interested in but that was somehow inevitable. Now she was looking up in his face, and the snowflakes were falling and absurdly making him want to kiss her

again, to taste her frosty freshness through them. But her eyes, in their new seriousness, rather took him aback. He thought he had never seen her before when she was not laughing. Perhaps she caught his inward recoil, for she did laugh a little now, withdrawing from him.

"Silly," she said.

"I'm going to call this the kissing tree." He was lightly making her amends for a momentary coolness. "All trains stop."

This apparently she did not hear.

"What should you say if I told you I was going away?" she asked him.

"Leave me?" he jested. "And the kissing tree?"

"You'll see," said Grissie. "You just wait, that's all."

She was the only thing, he knew, that made his days in town endurable, for he found no idling at Lawyer Pettis's. He could still do tasks like lightning and get somnolent moments by pretending they were not yet done, but there was no advantage in being quick. The faster he worked the more he was given to do, and his cleverness lay now in pious shirking. The walk back and forth with Grissie kept him alive, he told her.

"Say," he begged, "come back a minute. I forgot something."

So she went back with him and he never knew whether she suspected why she was going. But under the big pine he put his arms about her again and kissed her with fervor, not like the follies of a silly romp, and told her she was not to go away.

"The idea!" said Grissie. Her eyes were shining brilliantly into his, but she was laughing. "Anybody'd think you cared."

"I do care," said Ben. "Break me all up, if you went away."

"You!" said Grissie. "Anybody'd think you liked me awfully."

"I do," said Ben. "I love you — love you —" It sounded well to him, though silly, and he went on saying it.

And now Grissie put up her lips and they met his seriously, it seemed, differently, and then twisted herself free from him and walked on. But she did not laugh any more that night and he could not. He was irritated with her; she seemed to be taking all their fun away.

At eight o'clock that evening, after his father was in bed, he went in to practice shorthand with Ellen. Ardelia was charmed with his coming. It made Ellen almost human, she thought, to have young company beside her. Ben, to Ardelia's awe, could really make the child laugh. They sat at the table in a pleasant absorption over their books and Ardelia had her place at the other end and sailed away in dreams on the white sea of cloth. It was prettily domestic, and Peleg was never mentioned. Tonight Ellen looked impulsively up at Ben, her pencil poised, and asked:

"Is Grissie going to keep on taking lessons?"

"I guess not," said Ben, as if Grissie bored him exceedingly. "She seems to think she's going to get a place away somewhere. I hope she will."

Ellen had another question.

"Did Hugh write you where he is?"

"Where is he?" asked Ben. "Mother wouldn't tell me."

Ellen wondered, but she began her lesson and would say no more. Ardelia was not to hear.

The next morning, Neale took his ax and went into the

wood lot. There were a few little evergreens he meant to cut, about the fringing edge. It might be done as well months from now, but this was rather a free day with him, and the sense of it gave him ease. He went along the wood path and across the lower road and through the bars into Tabitha's lot, and his heart lifted within him at the solemn beauty of the place. Perhaps it meant only to him the dignity of its worth: but he was well aware of that and its relative importance to other woods about. The conditions of its life and growth had been unbroken in prosperity. It had been thinned at the right moment, and it was very old. The trees were magnificent in height and grandeur, the vistas between them most happily conceived. There was little sound as he stood there looking at them, hardly a whisper among their trembling tops. Perhaps the feeling in his heart was the perception of continued being which exalts a man when he puts his foot on his own land, sees his towers rise to the small heaven of earthly grandeur and believes his son and his son's son will preserve them sacredly. But whatever unformulated emotion was under his skin, he presently, having given enough to unaccustomed dreaming, took his ax from the bole where he had leaned it and turned to the first little tree to be sacrificed. And then he was aware of another step on the frozen ground. It was Squire Greene, and Neale, regarding him, felt almost a geniality at seeing him there. The squire, he thought, had come to renew his offer for the lot. It was a pleasure, of a grim sort, to receive him among their austere majesties and again deny him. But what Squire Greene said was this:

"Don't you put an ax to any o' them trees."

Neale stared at him.

"I'm goin' to cut down some o' this young stuff," he said, bending to explain: for it seemed Greene could have

meant only to advise him foolishly. Greene held his most rigid attitude. His unmeaning air of spurious dignity had come over him. He was remembering that he was the squire.

"If anybody lays an ax to one o' them trees," said he, "little or big, I'll have the law on him."

And still Neale stared at him.

"You act for all the world," said the squire, nettled because the man's silence gave him no point of attack, "as if I hadn't bought the lot an' paid for it."

"Bought it?" said Neale foolishly. "Paid for it?"

"Yes, you know that as well as I do. It's recorded, an' you can see it any day you're a mind to. An' if you're comin' up here to make trouble, I'm ready for ye."

Suddenly Neale realized that it was true. They were both literal men. The one would not have invented a foolish fiction. The other was compelled to accept it. In some mad way, Neale knew, the deed had been done. He took up his ax again, put it over his shoulder and turned, without a look at Greene. The bars were down and he stepped over them and did not pause to put them up again. Greene after a moment also left the lot, and he did put up the bars. In silence Neale went down the hill and silently Greene followed him.

XXI

Neale walked home in a burning anger he had never felt since long past days when his natural governors assumed the right to curb him. If he had been a more apprehensive man, he might have shrunk from the turmoil of his blood. But he was built to meet all issues with unconcern, even the revolt of his own body. When he reached home, he left his ax in the shed and walked into the sitting-room where Mary sat alone, dreaming over Hugh's last letter and a haunting phrase about the poplar trees of France. That, strangely to her, had made him seem farther away than any fact of distance. When she heard her husband's step, she tucked the letter into her pocket, and it was thus, guiltily conscious of her haste, that she looked up at him with a moved, startled front. His face was terrible to her, flushed deeply and set as she had seen it perhaps twice in their lives together. He put his question, short and mandatory:

"Has she sold the wood lot?"

Mary knew now the crisis had come, and again she schooled herself not to flinch. It was not only that she must stand by Tabitha, but her inner self told her she could never support life if she dodged that issue or if, being stronger than Aunt Tab, she did not take the full burden of it. So, though her heart quaked, she looked at him steadily and answered:

"Yes, she has."

"When?" The one word seemed all he could articulate and that with difficulty.

"I don't know the date exactly," said Mary, and this was true. "Some weeks ago."

"What d' she get for it?"

"I don't know," said Mary, and this also was true.

"It's a lie," said Neale. "You do know."

Mary looked at him, at a complete loss for an answer to that. The fact was that she was apprehensive for him, warned by the color in his face, the insane glitter of his eyes. She shrank from the end toward which this might be leading him. When Hugh was little and had fallen into fits of rage and held his breath until he seemed on the verge of bursting, Mary could never, although the doctor told her he was safe enough, keep down her anguish of terror. And this she felt for her husband. She was all a maternal panic for him. It seemed to her a cruel invention of circumstance that, now he had hardened himself in his own tyranny, the punishment for it should hit him in a place where it could hurt him most.

"You made up your mind," he pursued, "not to tell me?"

"Thomas," said she, "true as I live, I don't know. And don't you ask Tabitha. I don't believe she'd answer you."

An ugly scorn darkened his face and brought the flicker of a smile. He would see whether Tabitha would answer. He turned toward the hall and she knew where he was going. She ran past him and put herself at the foot of the stairs and faced him. Mary was beautiful then, though to him she was only an obstacle that barred his will. Her face was a glow of entreaty, for Tabitha, for Hugh perhaps, who would be found to have the money: most of all for Neale himself.

"Thomas," she said, "don't you go up there."

"Stand one side," said he.

Mary put her hand on his arm. He shook it off, but she persisted.

"It's no way, to go up into her room." Why, she could not have told him, but she knew Aunt Tab must not be terrified up there in her own intimate retreat, or she might never be able to sleep within those walls again. Besides if she came down Mary could stand beside her. She did not wait to persuade him further, because she knew he could not be persuaded. "Tabitha!" she called, and immediately Aunt Tab's door opened. "Come down," said Mary, in a clear untroubled voice that carried all the reassurance her rising heart willed to it. "Thomas wants to speak to you."

But as she called her, Mary was sure she would not obey. Aunt Tab, she thought, would close her door and turn the key. And then, Mary was certain, Thomas would break down the door, though this, she determined, not until he in some way broke her first. But Aunt Tab came immediately out and down the stairs. Neale gave one look at her as she began the descent, muttered, "God!" below his breath and went back into the sitting-room. And indeed a stranger figure than Aunt Tab's could not have been imagined. She had had that morning one of her moments of childlike desire for pleasure, for balls at Saratoga and slim-waisted admirers with long curling locks, as she saw them in Godey's, and she had opened one of her magic chests and taken out a remnant of light blue gauze, and lute-string ribbon and pink roses. In a delirium of pleasure she had wound them about her and crowned herself; and now, forgetful of her finery, her face blanched, her blue eyes glittering with fear of Thomas, she came down to him.

"Step right into the sitting-room," said Mary quietly. She was rather glad of Aunt Tab's masquerade. She

judged Thomas would think her crazy, and that might make him merciful. Tabitha went into the room where he stood awaiting her, and if Mary's hand had not restrained her at a moderate distance, she would have walked up, "into his face and eyes," as Mary thought, before her stunned mind halted her. But there she stood now, smiling at him foolishly, her eyes, fascinated, fixed upon his angry face.

"How much d'he pay you?" asked Neale, and then she knew she was in for her great interrogation. She had really known it when Mary called her. This was the summons she had expected all these weeks; but it was more terrible than she had thought. Perhaps, too, it was slightly less so: for she had not counted on the merciful numbing of her faculties.

"Come," said Neale, "you better answer. How much d'he pay you for the lot?"

And Aunt Tab did not speak. Mary, who had taken her hand, as it hung at her side, gave it a little warning pressure, not so much in sympathy as to tell her the time had come.

"Do you mean to say you ain't goin' to answer me?" asked Neale, in a low voice.

Mary started at the voice. She was afraid of it. With a sick certainty, it came to her that she knew how crimes befell in houses safe as this: some savage inner devil, decently hidden but never slain, lay in men and women and suddenly sprang out to desperate deeds.

"D'you go to him an' offer it to him?" asked Neale, "or did he come to you? If he stepped into this house, by —"

He stopped and Mary said impulsively:

"He didn't, Thomas, never since the night he talked to you."

She was innocently harrying him and he felt a small sudden rage against her, a whiff from the greater wind of his large anger. He turned upon her and seized her wrist, and Mary found he was dragging her out into the hall. And then Aunt Tab began to scream.

"O my soul!" she cried over and over, "don't you hurt Mary! Don't you hurt Mary!"

And Mary, revolting under the indignity of it, called over her shoulder:

"Don't be a fool, Tabitha. He isn't hurting me."

But he was bruising her soft wrist: only now the pain was less because she was not resisting him, but walking with her head up. Once she warned him:

"Thomas, you'd better not. Thomas, dear —" she had not called him that for years —"remember."

Thomas did not hear her. He had no rage against her, only she was the obstacle in his path. He took her, in one sweep of striding haste, across the other front room, pushed her into the bedroom behind it and locked the door upon her. And Aunt Tab, seeing that Mary was indeed not to be killed, slipped noiselessly through the kitchen and the shed and ran for the barn. She plunged into its dusty cavern and the cows rattled their chains at her, thinking she meant more fodder; but she saw the ladder at the mow and fled up over the rounds. And Neale, striding into the barn behind her, too set in his dignity to run, saw the streaming of her drapery and the last white ankle vanish into the hay. He went to the foot of the ladder and called up to her:

"Don't be more of a fool than you can help. You come down here an' answer my questions or I'll know the reason why. Come down, I say."

Aunt Tab did not speak. She had burrowed into the hay in the corner where the boys used to keep their

ginger beer and cards at times when such treasure became unsafe in the house. The hay was sticking to her poor finery, and the dust of it made her sneeze. If Neale had been himself even he might have laughed then at the imagined plight of Tabitha's gewgaws; but he was still furious at being withstood and ragingly conscious underneath that he had been made ridiculous. Squire Greene would bear it in mind to his dying day how he had had to shoulder his ax and walk off defeated. So poor a thing as Tabitha would remember she hadn't answered him because she didn't choose. The spectacle of Tabitha up there in a foolish state of defense did present itself to him, but only as something that made him the more absurd.

"I give you one more chance," said he, "to come down off'n there." Tabitha, at the moment, was no more to him than the little Tabitha he had ruled over and ignored when they were children. "You hear me? I'll count three. If you ain't made up your mind to come down that ladder then, I'll go up an' fetch you. An'—" here his foolishness of rage came over him as he recalled the certainty that he had been ridiculous, "I'll shake you like a dog shakin' a rat. Then we'll see 'f you'll tell." He counted slowly, angrier still because now he began to remember that Tabitha was a grown woman, though with crazy pink roses in her hair: "One — two —three."

And still Aunt Tab neither spoke nor moved, nor was there the slightest rustling in the hay. He set his foot on the ladder and climbed rapidly. And somehow — perhaps his stiff knee betrayed him, perhaps his mind climbed faster than his foot and so confused him — the ladder swayed and shook him off, and he fell and lay there at its foot. The ladder itself did not fall. It sprang back to rest, but Tabitha heard the heavy thud of his impact, and wallowed out from her dusty hiding-place to creep as near

the edge of the mow as she dared and look over at him. He lay on his back, one arm under him, and she thought he had fallen across an old ox-yoke she had noticed in her flight. His eyes were closed, and he grimaced a little, as if in discomfort; but he was not apparently trying to move.

"O Thomas," said she, peering down at him, "you hurt?"

He did not answer, and she reviewed her own position. She ought, of course, to go down the ladder and summon Mary; but it seemed unlikely that he could be hurt, so masterful was he over circumstance. This might be, she thought, a feint to betray her into coming down. She remembered difficult times in their childhood when he had pretended and then jumped out at her. She was not in bodily fear of him; but she did think he might seize her by the ankle or the dress, and terrify her into answering. He lay too near the ladder to be absolutely harmless. She became irritated with him for making her so much trouble, and also, now that he had given up the ladder, she felt irrationally safe. She began to talk to him.

"Thomas," said she, "I wouldn't for the world keep you from knowin' about the wood lot; only I feel as if 'twas about the only thing I ever had 'twas mine, an' seems 'f I had a right to sell. An' I sold. You never tell me anything about your business, Thomas, an' I dunno why I should tell you." She peered over her slippery refuge and a new alarm seized her. "Thomas, be you hurt? You open your eyes an' look at me, if you be. You needn't say a word, an' I'll holler for Trueman, loud's ever I can."

Here he did move his head slightly, but he did not look at her. Tabitha in her nervousness, lost patience.

"Don't you see," she said, "I can't get down while

you're layin' there? You used to ketch my ankles. Don't you know you did?" Her voice rose upon a high hysterical note. "Thomas, what under the sun possesses you to act so? I know you're doin' it to get the better o' me, but it scares me 'most out o' my senses." Old wrongs rushed upon her, the cruelties of his silence and his hardness of heart toward the boys whose miseries she resented more than her own. "I never thought the time'd come when I'd set here an' tell you to your face you're no kind of a husband to Mary nor no kind of a father to your boys. The way you've felt towards me — that's neither here nor there. But you've turned your boys against you, an' one of 'em's run away because he had to — Thomas, you ain't hurt, be you?"

Her sanity came back, the mood, valid as the hysterical prophesying of an enthusiast, passed from her and she knew that he was really hurt and that she must go down the ladder. She rose and swung herself about and, holding to the corner buttress, gingerly set her foot. But irrational fear was strong upon her, and when she had got within a half dozen rounds of the bottom, she carefully turned herself about, let go her hold and jumped. She was agile, and the jump took her safely over him. And then she stayed not, but ran with all speed to the house and unlocked the bedroom door, calling upon Mary, who, surprisingly at ease, sat there darning stockings. Mary, her first anger over, had determined that no one should see her disquieted at these indignities; so she had got her work and, in an agony, darned while she listened. Aunt Tab, her gauzy raiment all awry and the straws like bedlam in her hair, was no more reassuring than her speech.

"Thomas fell in the barn," she panted. "I guess he's killed himself."

Mary dropped her stocking and ran out of the house,

Aunt Tab behind her, and there on the barn floor she found him. Now he opened his eyes.

"Can you move?" she asked him, in such tenderness that it melted her sweet voice to an exceeding beauty. He shook his head slightly, and then he glanced at Aunt Tab there in her absurdity, and she, meeting the look, was aghast at the blackness of it, and turned and fled.

"I'll get somebody," said Mary. "You wait."

He could not choose but wait. In half an hour the neighborhood knew Tom Neale had "fell off the mow." The Gleasons saw Aunt Tab rushing by in her tatters and her straw, to summon Trueman and Hannah, and, stopping her to learn the news, had started out like runners after a battle, to carry it. Mary had telephoned for the doctor and asked him to bring Ben with him in his car, and then she went out to the barn again and covered her husband with a blanket and rolled up her apron and tucked it under his cheek. But she dared not try to straighten even the bent arm, for when she touched it he shook his head at her. She sat down on the rough brown floor beside him and sought, in that despairing way women have, to make her broken heart do him some good. And presently Trueman and Gleason came, and in a minute more, while they were planning a way to lift him, the doctor and Ben. And among them all he was carried into the house without misadventure and put to bed in the bedroom where Mary had sat at her darning, waiting to be let out. The doctor stayed a long time, and did a good deal of cautious examining, and when Mary followed him to the door at last he told her there would be no immediate crisis. But Neale was seriously hurt. And while Mary and the others were busy about him, Aunt Tab had been walking back and forth through the kitchen, moaning and twisting her hands. Ben, himself frowning under the irritation of

emotions strange to him, came on her, and began to denude her of her straw and her roses and her ribbons and gauze, picking her methodically as you might pick a tree of fruit. When he began, Hannah, who was darting about the kitchen, heating water and airing sheets, lifted a stove cover significantly, indicating the rosy wreath. She knew how Tabitha from time to time dressed herself up till she looked "like the Old Scratch," and she judged this to be a moment for disposing of stage properties. Ben knew better. He was sure Aunt Tab would need her treasures. So he folded the ribbons and gauze and dropped the wreath on them, and then carried the pile up to her room. When he came down she was drinking a cup of tea Hannah had made for her, and settled thereafter into a perturbed silence. Perhaps the loss of her bedlam trappings had helped her to be calm.

Now the doctor had gone, and Ben waylaid his mother after her brief talk with him outside. She stood at the door before going in, the breeze stirring her hair and her face nobly calm.

"How was it, mum?" asked Ben.

"He fell," said Mary. "In the barn. That's all. We mustn't ask him about it. 'Twould only worry him to tell — if he can tell. He hasn't spoken yet."

"No," said Ben. "There's no need of pestering him."

"You tell Hannah to go right along and do everything," said Mary. "I sha'n't leave him a minute, not a minute."

Ben opened the door for her, and went off into the kitchen, to tell Hannah. But he stopped before he told her and faced what he was thinking: that there was a queer lightness and freedom in knowing just where his father was. And then he was ashamed, and wondered if it wasn't just as bad as to wish his father was dead.

XXII

The ordered discipline of sickness now began. Trueman stayed all day and part of the night, ready to lift Neale, when he had to be turned in bed, and Ben, slyly relieved to intermit the study of law, was at his mother's call. This was still an old-fashioned place where neighbor did for neighbor and there were callers dropping in all day, bringing little delicacies and offers of help. Gleason especially was at hand. He was a good man in sickness, with soft speech and a gentle touch, and Mary was thankful for him, knowing she could pay him in ways the family would accept. But Mary herself! Never since her children's babyhood, except that one night when she said good-by to Hugh, had she tasted such anguished apprehension, such rapturous mother yearnings. Neale, prostrate there before her, brought to earth in his anger and pride, was the center of her hungry devotion. She could not have said, even to her own heart, how dear he was to her. Here was her passion of tenderness, pent for years in her breast because he had been the rock itself. When he had made love to her, in the old days, he had been a wonder of beautiful young manhood, of trembling, broken speech. But thereafter she had become like his own hand, for service only, not for cherishing, save to the end of more service, and she had hardly known how to support her distance from him. There had been shy moments when, starved of fondness, she had kissed his coat on the nail. That she always shrank from remembering, because she looked at the pretty folly, even at

the minute, through his own eyes, uncomprehending eyes that judged woman's irrational nonsense and turned from it to his work. But now he was her most pathetic captive, to be loved to the measure of her desires. She knew her solicitude would irk him, and went back and forth — for they had moved him out of the cramped bedroom into the large front room — with soft step and untroubled look. She bathed and fed him, and sat beside him sewing, telling him, at intervals when he looked inquiringly at her, bits of news about the farm and neighborhood. It vexed him to have Ben about, Ben whom he loved most, and one day, musing on it, she found the reason. He was irritated afresh at his own misery if it kept Ben from the office. The push and drive of his life went into everything, and especially the advancement of his son; the boy was to be a lawyer without delay. So she ordered Ben back to work, and he grimaced a little, but went. There were distractions, too, in Beckenham, and Grissie had pouted at him because he was no longer walking back and forth. But now he took the buggy and colt, and left them at the stable, and Grissie drove with him and the neighbors said they were courting. Ellen, too, heard it, and it hurt her. How could Ben, she wondered, go about with a girl who lured him on? The evenings of shorthand had been intermitted since Neale's accident, and she made up her mind they must never begin again, for she, too, was busy with her days in town.

Ben swaggered a little now and tasted the savor of being head of the house. And yet it was all an empty bluster. He was too sweet-natured to jostle his mother's supremacy, and too intimate with the ways of hired men to disturb Trueman's ordered course. Only it did give him a sense of his own value to get up in the morning to a leisure all his own, unclouded by apprehension of being sent to bed

with the dictum of "a hard day to-morrow." And he wondered often what the neighborhood would say if it knew he carried in his pocket six hundred dollars. Often he was vastly tempted to tell Grissie, when they were driving fast to town, that he was rich enough to buy the things she wanted: for she coveted many things and boldly, though with gushes of punctuating laughter, dwelt on them, in no discontent, but sheer hunger, and avowed her purpose of having them, too. And every day, morning and night, Ben drew up under the big pine tree and they laughed and kissed. Grissie in her secret heart wondered if they were engaged; but she had her reserves and dared not ask. Then one morning she failed to appear at the trysting place. Ben never went to the house for her. She had discouraged that. It seemed to her it would look more like being engaged, and she did not know what Mary Neale would say. That evening he sauntered down the road to ask Gleason to sit up with his father, and in the course of their few words asked idly:

"Where's Grissie this morning?"

Gleason shook his head.

"That girl beats me," said Gleason. "Didn't she tell you?"

"No," said Ben.

"Why, she's gone off to Boston. Luce lent her the money to take a room an' see what she can do. Went off all of a whew. Said she'd got to take it or leave it. But I'd sooner she'd be there than round here, in an' out o' Luce's store. He ain't got a very good name."

"Oh, I don't believe she's been into the store," said Ben. "I should have known it if she had."

Gleason said nothing, but looked at him with a satirical

twist of his good-natured face. He knew Grissie, in an affectionate, equable way, and it seemed to him Ben, having another sort of opportunity, might have known her better. Gleason concluded Ben was green.

"All right then," said Ben, "you be over about nine."

But he did not go home. He walked on to the little house and up the path and saw Ellen sitting alone by the table. There were books before her, but they were unopened. She sat with her elbows on the table, her head in her hands. Ben thought she might be crying. He opened the door and went in, and she sprang up and faced him, surprised, unmoved. She had not been crying, he saw, but she looked coldly at him.

"Mother's gone out," said she, "down to the Gleasons'."

Ben did not wait for her bidding, but seated himself in the other chair drawn up to the table. It was his place when they studied together. The boldness of his haste was deliberate. Unless somehow he entrenched himself, she looked capable of standing there, coldly irresponsive, unwelcoming.

"Sit down, Ellie," said he. "I had to. I get so confounded tired. Father's no better, you know."

She did sit down, unwillingly it seemed.

"Can't we begin to study again?" asked Ben. He looked at her in his old friendly manner, and she was not unmoved by the appeal in his face, the wistful eyes, strangely made by some trick of the brows to express emotion, and the challenge of laughter, too. It never seemed to pay to be angry with Ben, or hold him to the more rigid standards. He disarmed you as a clever child disarms. She was innocent of suspicion, and it would have been far from her to suspect him of coming to her

because Grissie had gone, leaving him a little hurt, a little angry; yet she did want to know whether he had known about Grissie.

"So she's gone," said Ellen, looking at him gravely.

"Yes," said Ben.

"D'you know she was going?"

"She told me so. I didn't know when, though. I'm glad of it. We're too slow round here for Grissie."

He found her melting under that. The color came back to her cheeks and her eyes met his frankly, without that vague reproach. But she was clarity itself. She had no arts, even the precautionary ones, to hide her own emotions. And she did want to understand him better. Larry was her friend, but Ben was her only playmate. And yet Larry knew that if the specter of age could have been laid between them, he might have been a princely playmate for her.

"Ben," said she, "I don't see how you could."

"Could what?" asked Ben. He thought of the six hundred dollars in his inside pocket. It did gnaw him a little in an intermitting way, and sometimes he woke in the night and wondered if it could be possible that Ellen really knew Hugh had meant it for her. And he would assure himself it was lunacy to put six hundred dollars where silly Ardelia could lay her hands on it; he would tell Hugh so when he gave it back to him. And then he would go to sleep again.

Ellen was looking at him in the clearest of questionings.

"Go with Grissie," she said. "You don't like her. You told me so. But you go with her."

"But, Ellie," said Ben, in his gentlest persuasion, "I couldn't let her walk all that five miles and I ride, now could I? We went the same time in the morning, too. You're such a lot earlier."

"Everybody says you're going with her," insisted Ellen.

Still she looked a little comforted, and he saw it and tried to comfort her the more. Ben wasn't playing a game. He never meant, in any specious sense, to cozen; only nature was playing the game through his wistful eyes and ready tongue. Nature found him as facile as she had found Grissie. She struck her summons, and they answered with an unthinking certainty and quick joyousness. It was pleasant to be young and to tread the prettiest ways, and their dancing feet could hardly let them stop to wonder what other men and maids had gone those ways.

"Folks will say anything," said Ben, in one of the neighborhood phrases he affected. "You know how they talk. If they'd got onto our doing shorthand up on Hemlock Ridge, they'd said we were engaged, too."

He laughed and Ellen laughed, looking at him light-heartedly now she had him back.

But the ease of it, the frank confident look of her, piqued him, and he said impetuously:

"Ellen, don't you ever think about it?"

"What?" asked Ellen, the frank look unchanged.

"Being — in love."

Her eyes dropped a little, but instantly they held his bravely. The color ran up into her cheeks and made him think of roses.

"I don't want to talk about such things," she said.

But a devil of rashness had him now and he asked her:

"Didn't any fellow ever kiss you?"

"No," flamed Ellen.

"By George!" said Ben. He wondered at her, but also he admired. This was a challenge. It seemed a

gay feat to persuade a girl like that. But she was going on, compelled it seemed, by the truth in her.

"I did myself," she said, unwilling, even sulky, "but he didn't kiss me back."

Ben was breathing faster. He had never felt so excited over human queerness.

"You, Ellen?" he said. "You couldn't. What made you?"

But Ellen seemed to throw all lesser emotions aside, and put up her head a little, proudly; she answered with a clearness of dignity that thrust him farther off:

"It was Hugh. I kissed him good-by."

"Hugh!" said Ben, to himself. "Old Hugh! He writes to you, doesn't he?" he ventured.

"Oh, yes," said Ellen, glad they were steering out of these foolish inlets of talk. "I had a letter this morning. Want to see it?"

Ben did want to see it, and she got it for him from the secretary where, he noted, it was lying open to Ardelia's eyes. He ran it through hurriedly, afraid of it indeed. It was a friendly letter, but at the end came the hint he feared. "Whatever Ben tells you from me," Hugh had written, "it's all right. Have you done it yet?"

"I wanted to ask you about that," said Ellen. "What is it he wants me to do?"

Ben sat for a moment more, his eyes on the page. There was the money within reach of his hand. Should he answer by putting it down on the table before her, giving his message and going away? But there was still Ardelia. Would Hugh have it serve Ardelia for a dowry when she married Peleg Simpson? Hugh couldn't love Ellen. He couldn't have let her kiss him unanswered if he did. The business of the money was only one of his

queernesses. And then the philanderer's instinct rose in him and he threw the letter on the table.

"Ellie," said he, "Hugh knew mighty well what's in my mind. He wants you to tell him whether I've asked you to be engaged to me."

She heard him, but without a trace of the old fierceness. It was so different from Hugh's rough importunity, his inexplicable physical overthrow. Ben had spoken gravely and it awed her, from him who was all gaiety. He rose and stood looking at her, the wistful gaze more moving now because he was a little frightened at what he had done, at the risk he ran of losing her, at his risk with Hugh.

"Don't say anything, Ellie," he urged her. "I won't ask you now. But you think about me. Think whether you couldn't like me. Only don't turn me down."

He was quickly out of the room, and as he glanced through the window in passing, he saw she was still standing, one hand on the table and the other pathetically at her heart. He wondered if he had made the heart beat faster, and the thought stirred him until his own began to race and almost he returned to her. But instead he went home and, after a word with his mother, ran upstairs to Aunt Tab. He had got to know how Aunt Tab felt about the money: whether she had given Hugh the whole of it and how she would like its being passed on to Ellen. He thought, in the way we contemplate things we never actually mean to do, that he would lay the money down before her and tell her it was hers.

XXIII

Ben found her sitting there, hands folded in her lap. She seemed to be listening, and while he talked to her he noticed that she turned her head at intervals and listened. Aunt Tab's perception of human forces when she peered down at Brother Thomas from the mow and told him her inner mind, had summarily convinced her that she had previously known nothing about life as it is; and now she was, if not prepared for anything, anticipatory. She had heard the amazing voice of drama. She listened for it again, to an extent that almost shut out the sounds of the visible world. When Ben came in after his bold knock — knocks had not been bold when the master was about the house; they were sly taps and scratches — she turned her head and seemed on the point of starting from her chair.

"Your father worse?" she quavered. Her eyes brightened with their queer glittering light, and she seemed to be, not welcoming tragedy but preparing for it. It had become the only commonplace.

"No," said Ben. He drew up a chair and sat astride it, near her, to get her attention at short range. "Aunt Tab, what the dickens made you sell that lot?"

Aunt Tab looked at him and smiled. There was no mirth in the smile, but an uneasy attempt to make its bravery serve, whatever argument she might need. But she did not answer. Ben smiled back at her.

"How much d'you get for it?" he asked, and hitched his chair a little nearer. The back of it almost touched

her knees, and she looked at it apprehensively. She felt crowded, and wondered if she was going to find herself in a corner. Then Ben crinkled his eyes and laughed, and she lost all fear of him and laughed, too. Ridiculous, she thought, that she should be afraid of Ben: but tragedy was taking aspects, these days.

"I s'pose you know," said he, "how much that lot was worth."

Aunt Tab leaned forward and laid a warning finger on his arm.

"Don't you tell me, Bennie," said she. "I don't want to know. If I ain't done as well as I might, what good's it goin' to do me now?"

"Right you are," said Ben. He had no idea of teasing Aunt Tab. "But say, why didn't you pocket the money? Why didn't you keep it for yourself?"

She was a little unhappy now. She didn't, it was true, love him as she loved his brother, but she couldn't tell him that.

"Bennie," said she earnestly, "your father sets the world by you. He'd do anything under the sun you asked him to. An' Hugh might beg him till he dropped. Besides, Hugh wanted to go away an' you never did."

"Oh, I don't mean that," said Ben, absently noting that a fine pink skin could shrivel into criss-cross lines. Ellen's skin and Grissie's were no finer than Aunt Tab's in long past days, and yet see how it had shrivelled. For the first time in his life he had a vivid perception of the physical tragedy that lies in wait for youth. "I don't want it. Only seems 's if you'd better have kept some of it for yourself."

"I've got a home here," said Aunt Tab. "An' I guess my clo'es'll last my time. I'd rather Hughie'd have it, especially as things have turned out. Why, he's in the

army, Ben. He's in the army, same's it might have been our war. You weren't born then. But I was. Mother scraped lint, an' the sick soldiers were all round the town. An' when anybody's in the war, you don't know what you'll hear."

The look of listening intensified. She turned from him and seemed to be inclining her ear, perhaps, Ben fantastically thought, to the sound of cannon far away. It hit him straight in the heart that she should be so ridiculously loving and so devoid of sense. He bent forward and kissed the withered cheek.

"You're a great girl, Tab," said he. The boys often called her Tab and she didn't mind. Indeed she rather liked it, as throwing her back to their own state of feeling. "You needn't worry, whatever happens." He got up and turned to go. "I'll see you through."

And with that he strode away, reassured by finding she was as reckless as he had thought, and that the six hundred dollars was safer where it was. Aunt Tab, listening while he went whistling down the stairs, felt the terror of seeing a long-established mastership disputed. He would not have whistled, she knew, if Thomas had been about, ready to summon him to some task or remind him that it would be a hard day to-morrow. She listened for Brother Thomas's voice in reprimand, although no one had heard it since the day when he had asked his last question of her in the barn. Mary, at Ben's whistle, hurried out to him. She, too, was hit by it in that vulnerable place: her compassion. For she knew it would be wormwood to the helpless man who lay there assaulted by sounds of cheerfulness he could not check.

"Don't, dear," she said, with a hand on Ben's arm, and he stopped whistling; he knew.

Not long after this he had a letter from Grissie. She

liked Boston, she told him, down to the ground. She liked her boarding house. There was hot water all the time and plenty of fellows, if you wanted to go to a show. But Mr. Luce threatened to come up to see her. She didn't know whether she liked that. She didn't like his letters very well. Anyway she could put him off — and wouldn't Ben come and spend two or three days? He could have a room at her place, and she'd show him the town. Ben didn't think much about the letter as indicating Grissie's state of mind, but now that he seemed somehow to have settled Aunt Tab's renunciation of her money, it gave a friendly counselling, and he felt one of those warm waves he had: the desire of pleasure, irresponsible laughter and folly. It was only youth.

"Mum," said he, "I'm going to Boston for a day or two."

"What for?" asked Mary, immediately adding, "I'm afraid your father —"

"Don't tell him," said Ben. "He never'll miss me. No use, mum; I've got to go. Hugh lit out. He didn't stop to ask."

Mary's quick maternal understanding gushed for him. He was only a boy, it told her, the more irresponsible because he had been kept a boy. And plenty of his mates lived in the midst of things youth wants and youth should have. He had cited Hugh, and that was moving to her. Hugh's desires, she felt the guilt of knowing, had been more vital to her than any wish of Ben's. Yet, her mind answered inevitably, Ben had had no longings beyond his easy life. But now he had them she must meet them in him.

"I guess I won't say anything about it to your father," she concluded. "Yes, Ben, you go. Anybody going with you?"

"No," said Ben. "I'll stay at Larry's hotel."

"Well," said his mother, "you be careful. I'll give you ten dollars out of what I put by. I guess you can't stay long on that," she added, smiling at him.

So that afternoon she laid out his clothes, and the next morning Trueman took him to the early train. Ben stopped at the office on the way and made his request so tentative and altogether charming that Lawyer Pettis almost jovially told him to see the town and then turned back to his books with a sigh over the fleetingness of youth.

That day Ardelia walked to Beckenham and came back laden with packages. Ellen, seeing her at twilight plod wearily up the path, opened the door to her and silently took some of her bundles. When her mother was tired, even over the horribly prophetic fine sewing, she felt angry love for her, and a certainty that if they two were somewhere in hiding, miles from Peleg, she would spend her own blood to save Ardelia. The packages, it proved, were eatables, and one Ardelia kept her hand on, while Ellen was emptying tea and sugar and the rest.

"Don't you touch this till I tell you," said Ardelia. Her voice quivered pathetically. "I'm afraid you'll throw it out the door or somethin'. There! I might as well tell you. It's a chicken. Peleg Simpson's comin' to-morrer, to dinner."

Ellen, in a cold rage, went about putting away the things. She brought a piece of paper to tighten the cover of the coffee caddy, and she emptied the sugar with such delicate nicety that not a grain was spilled. And all the time she was conscious of that fury within herself and was, in a musing corner of her mind, curious about it. Was it jealousy, she wondered? Or was it an outraged sense of decency, because Peleg was a loathsome

creature? There was justice in it, she felt, whatever you called it. Indeed, it was all justice. But she did not answer, and Ardelia put away the chicken. Now she was conscious of her tired feet and that, with the naughtiness of Ellen, weakened her flagging spirit.

"I had 'em cut it up," said she. "I thought maybe we'd have a fricassee."

Ellen did not answer. She began to set the table with an exquisite care, and Ardelia noted that she brought out the clean table-cloth and then put it back again. Ardelia knew why, and could easily have wept over the cruel justice that made Ellen remember it would be needed next day, in its freshness, for Peleg: she would observe that rigid fairness, but she would not, Ardelia thought, refrain from breaking her mother's heart. At supper Ardelia ventured a few little items, gathered in her shopping tour, and Ellen listened politely but absently, probably thinking, Ardelia guessed, in the hurt rage of the weak pitted against the implacable, of her mother's folly. And after supper when the dishes had been done and Ardelia sat down tired in her sewing chair, resolved to do no more to-night, her inexorable child seemed so to have dragged the heart out of her, Ellen took down a shawl from the nail and said:

"I'm going down to speak to Larry Greene."

Ardelia roused herself. Several emotions came to clashing life within her.

"No, you ain't either," said she, "goin' down through them black woods to-night."

"I'll take the lantern," said Ellen. She was wrapping a knitted scarf about her head.

"Besides," said Ardelia, "it ain't fittin'. You think you can set yourself up to say who I shall go with, an' you're postin' off to a man's house all alone, in the dead

o' night, an' it ain't decent. You're a grown-up girl now, an' you must act accordin'."

Something in the words arrested Ellen. She was not used to heeding Ardelia; she always felt she knew a great deal better herself. An unrecognized scorn dwelt in her passion of love. But now Ardelia had hurt her in an outrageous way. She had struck at the child's heart in her and poisoned it, not so much with a knowledge of the rules of life but of the tawdriness they were made to cleanse. Ellen took off the scarf and turned about to get her candle.

"Where you goin'?" asked Ardelia, lonesomeness in her voice and a sick desire to atone. Nothing, she felt, was worth quarreling over. It made things so uncomfortable.

"To bed," said Ellen, in a colorless voice, and Ardelia dared not put her contrition into words.

Ellen went up to her cold room and at once blew out the candle; she lay down on the bed and covered herself with a quilt. For a long time she lay watching the moonlight coming in at the window and making patterns on the ceiling. She was not angry now, but filled with a horrible distaste for life, the mere fleshly cruelties of it that most people seemed to take so acquiescently. She heard her mother fasten the doors and go into her bedroom. The house was quiet, in a breathless way, as if it waited. What was it in herself, Ellen wondered, that made her hate things unless they were beautiful? Why did the thought of Peleg and her mother in an intimacy she dared not picture, drive her to a sickening frenzy? She wondered, as she had many times within the last months, whether she was an unnatural creature to run from everybody, from Hugh when he would have loved her, from Ben's entreating words. All but her mother:

she had passionate love for her, only now it never could be shown because her mother had lent herself to this unspeakable fellowship. She lay there with the madness of youth upon her, the frenzy of ignorance and the wild questions there seems none to answer. Suddenly she threw off the quilt and, not lighting her candle, crept downstairs. Ardelia, tired from her walk, was sleeping heavily, and Ellen, in deft caution, got her overshoes, the scarf and her coat, and went softly out into the yard. She locked the door behind her and slipped the key into its hiding-place under the stone. And then she set out along the well trampled path in the light snow down the lane and across the woods. She was in a high state of excitement and not afraid, companioned as she was by emotions greater than fear. Her father seemed to be with her, as he often did when she had hurt her mother and was repentant, yet knew she should do it again; and once in the deep woods she thought some one called to her and, for a moment, that it was Hugh. She stopped, still not afraid; but there was only the creaking of the branches and far off the barking of a fox. And so she went on and came to the sight of Larry's cottage, and gave a distressful breath of relief because there was a light. If there had not been, she did not know how she could have managed the journey back again. She went up the path and, before Smilie had begun to bark, saw that Larry was sitting by the fire, idle, his head thrown back against his chair. He was at the door immediately, and Smilie rushed out, wagging at her.

"What is it?" called Larry. "Your mother sick?"

"Nothing," said Ellen. "Nothing's the matter."

She walked in past him, threw off her scarf and sat down on the little stool by the fire. Her cheeks were scarlet with her haste; the red rose of youth bloomed all

over them. Her eyes were wild as night, the night men hate to meet outside their homes. Larry, taking quiet note of her, knew a strange hour was before him, and went back to his own chair.

"I'm afraid something has happened," said he. "Get your breath and tell me."

She began, on a sudden tempestuous impulse:

"Mother said I mustn't come. So I went up to bed. And then I came."

Larry gave her a great surprise.

"I don't suppose you ought to come here, Nell," he said, "without your mother. You're grown up now."

"What difference does that make?" asked she.

"Well," said Larry, bringing down his note of emotion as hers was rising, "that's the way it is."

Then Ellen knew that, unless she could harden herself by memory of her wrongs, she must break down and cry.

"He's coming to dinner to-morrow," said she tremulously.

"Well," said he, "it'll be all in the way you take it. I keep telling you he isn't so bad."

"I don't care whether he's bad or good," said Ellen, in her passion. "Only he's alive. And she likes him. And I haven't got any mother any more."

Still she would not cry, but her face was wrung with misery. Larry sat there and looked at her, knowing he might never see anything so moving and so beautiful again. He knew, too, his own hour had struck. Here was the incarnate youth he loved offering itself to him to be guided — and where? Could it be into his own arms? Might she possibly be Diana to every last pulse of her, a creature content with his strangely ordered life and the tasks that delighted her in it now? Or was she

only unawakened? He got quietly up, pulled down his shades and locked the door.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Ellen.

"We can talk better," said he, coming back to his place. "If anybody comes — they won't though; it's too late — you go out the back way and run home."

She faced him, a redder flush in her cheeks, but her eyes defiant.

"You think so, too," she said, "just as mother does. You think I ought not to come here because I'm grown up, and you don't want anybody to see me. I should think everybody was crazy."

Larry laughed a little and answered quietly. But he determined to let her have the facts of her girl's destiny and make what use she might of them. She shouldn't suffer life in piecemeal and be hurt at every onslaught. Let it come on her and overwhelm her. If she'd got to be a woman, let her begin now. Nobody, not even he, could save her.

"Ellen," said he, "the fact is, you're so beautiful it's hard for a man to see you and not fall in love with you. Or at least to imagine what it would be to be in love with you. And no man's too old." ("Sweetheart!" he added under his breath. He wished he could be the first to call her that. Yet some dim fear in him told him the lucky lover might come after, and what then?) "No man's too old," he added. "I'm not too old. I love you, Nell. Think of it."

"You?" said Ellen. "How could you?"

"How indeed?" said Larry, unstirred by the sting of it. "But that's it. And because I'm old, I can't ask you to come here and live with Smilie and me." Smilie cocked an ear. "So I rather think your mother's right, and you mustn't come at all. Stay at home, Nell, and think

about love and lovers — young ones. That's the thing for you to do in your quarter of the moon. Think — and wish them to you. They'll come. And sometime you'll be glad."

Ellen surprised him. She began to laugh.

"Larry," she said, "you're very silly. If you really meant it, you know I'd come and stay all the time."

Larry got out of his chair.

"Now," he said, "put your scarf round your head, and come along. I'm going with you."

"But I want to ask you things," said Ellen.

"What things?"

She did not know. The confusion of his attack had shaken her past miseries. She felt a little happy and, above all, curious. She wished, since he used such pretty words and did not seem to want to touch her, he would go on talking about love.

"I can't," said she, confused, "see why everybody acts so."

"Because that's life," said Larry. "Turmoil, opposing forces, light, darkness. War, everywhere war." And then, as it happened with him in almost every minute of his waking life now, he referred the present to the war. It wasn't only that Britain and France were defending themselves from the unclean beast at their throats; it was because they had begun to defend themselves so magnificently that he saw all life was magnificent. Because they were brave, he must be; every man must be on whom the light and shadow of the war fell. And they fell on everybody in the entire world, and the world was not the same and never would be any more. "Well," said he, "sit down. I'm going to talk to you as I would to Hugh — almost. We were all pretty rotten before the war; but it's made values come out so — life, death, love, a kind

of sacrifice we'd never dreamed of. I don't want you to be befogged. I want you to see clear and be a great girl. About your mother. She's a perfect right to make her life over as she wants it. It's mighty hard for you, but she has. It hurts you in a million places. Let it hurt. Stand up to it. Think how they're standing up to things over there."

"It's big things they're dying for," said Ellen.

"Yes, but the point I make is this. Whatever comes, face it. And don't get ugly. The whole thing's so pathetic, Nell — life, and death overwhelming it — and the spirit. You do believe in the spirit, don't you?"

"Do you mean the Holy Spirit?" asked she timidly.

"I don't mean anything that has to do with church and dogma. I mean just spirit. The thing that isn't to be touched, but that's here all the time, waiting to be noticed. Almost like a dog that can't speak to you. O, hang it, Nell, I don't know what I'm saying; but let's not knuckle down, you to Peleg and I to being in love with you. Tomorrow you help cook the dinner, and when Peleg comes, you be decent to him and give your mother a nice day."

Her eyes were shining as she looked at him. She was thinking she had never seen just this man before.

"I don't know — honestly — whether I could," said she.

"Like enough; but you try. And you remember there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. Before the war there was no wickedness I wouldn't have done for you — no persuading you it isn't wrong for you to marry me. I couldn't do that now. I've seen wickedness won't do. Hardness won't do. Lying won't do. So I tell you I love you, Nell, but it isn't going to hurt either of us. Put on your knit thing and I'll go along through the woods with you." She was a little frightened in a way

that stirred her. He was so different. He was wonderful. "And," said he, "you mustn't come here any more."

Her lips set themselves and denied that.

"Why," said she, "I must see you."

"I'll come to you," said Larry. He was slipping on his coat. He unlocked the door and opened it and Smilie bounded out ahead. "Run along," said Larry. "I'll follow you."

They went down the path and across the road into the woods, and still they did not speak. When they came to the place where Larry had stood that day while Hugh held her and she struggled against him, he wondered if she, too, remembered. But she turned to him and said tremulously:

"You say you like me and you don't give me a chance —"

"No," said Larry. "I can't. Have you ever thought —" He was going to ask her plainly whether she thought Hugh loved her. But he did not dare. Hugh must follow his own leading. At the end of the lane he stopped. "I'll leave you here," said he. "Can you get in?"

She told him the key was under the stone.

"Then," said he, "I'll wait here, and when you get upstairs you light your candle and set it in the window. Then I shall know you're all right."

Ellen lingered. She turned back.

"Larry," said she, "if I did like you — like that — how should I know?"

Larry had his moment of hesitation. Then he answered gravely:

"You don't like me — like that. It's I that like you."

So Ellen, feeling that life was as mysterious as ever, went along to find her key under the stone.

XXIV

Larry, after the upward flare of the candle in the window — for it ran up as if it had something amazing to say to him — notified Smilie, who was making excursions about him in a small radius, and turned back. The woods seemed all alive as he went through them, alive with Ellen. Life was coming upon him strongly, like a wind from far peaks. He did not know where the peaks were; but the air from them was mighty. And indoors again he piled wood on his fire and gave Smilie a drink and saw her to bed again on her couch, and then sat down to his thinking, a little different since Ellen had come. Then he had been thinking of the war. Now he thought of the war and her. Still he was oppressed by his sense of the imminence of evil. It hung over him day and night, and he was afraid, not of men, not of death, but of evil and the everlasting death that lies in it. And always his mind continued making pictures which he tried to thrust away, of what had actually happened: of the gray-green rivers of men polluting Belgium. And this vision had sound in it: of explosives and songs and tramplings and maniacal shouts. Larry had never thought, in any personal acceptance and worship, of the Christian religion. He had a robust certainty that there was God; a Son of God seemed to him obstructive. But now, confronted with the "rise and slay" of paganism, the words of Christ seemed to him divine in their clarity, and he took to reading them in a thirsty haste. He never advanced beyond the idea of Christ he began with: not so much an ineffable and

authoritative personality as the cumulative vision of mankind. This was what man had reaped on the battle-ground of his despair, what he had judged it loveliest to believe. And the words were lovely. It seemed to him he might take refuge in them, refuge from his fear.

He was thinking to-night of his fear, and interpreting it to himself. It was not, he knew, a fear the unclean beast could pride itself on evoking, tribute because the beast was so terrible and so strong. (And always, behind the vision of the pathetic gray-green soldiery, obedient beyond the verge of recognized crime, there was the certainty of the impelling beast, a vapor, a veiled horror, something conjured out of the innocent earth and set up for vain idolatry.) But his own fear — it was the fear of looking into a pit where reptilian monsters still were spawning, the fear of meeting in humanity what humanity had forgotten in itself. It was man's shrinking from the savage still in man. But all the time while he thought of the great fear, a part of his mind dwelt on Ellen, and he knew he must not persuade her to him and yet wearily that he must. He called in old sophistries to help him. If they two were souls, why shouldn't they live out the span of earth together? A soul was a soul. It was foolishness, in the face of stars and wars and wonders, to talk about age and youth. And then, when the early morning hours came, with their drain on the forces of life, he thought of Ellen as a poor little unfriended girl, because her emotions were only beginning to put their fronds above the cold surface of the spring earth and there had never been anybody to tell her they were normal sweet activities and not the wrestling of the will. He had always had a theory of Ellen's fiercely virginal temperament, his own intimate and secret theory. She was her father's child, embodiment of his hidden self, and a part

of that self had been weariness of Ardelia's faded coquetries, unconscious scorn of them. Brock had been good to Ardelia, in a silent way, but Larry had seen him look at her sometimes, the wondering gaze of a man who has fettered himself to a creature not to be understood. He had been a jealous man, a man of one love and a single destiny, and Ardelia's weak commerce with affection had enraged him. Ellen was his spiritual child. And the more Larry thought of Ellen, the more his courage drooped and life ebbed out of him, and just before the dawn he went to the window, in a sudden frenzy of defeat, and put out his flag. Smilie whimpered a little, whether with the draught on her back or foreknowledge of the event, and Larry covered her, with a gentle hand, and said to her:

"Don't cry, old girl, don't cry, or you'll have me crying, too."

The next morning Ellen woke to a feeling of goodness she hadn't had for a long time. She felt serious, dignified, a woman. She had an impression that she owed something to Larry, and she remembered he had asked her to be less of a little devil to Peleg. Her mother had been up a long time, she judged when she went downstairs, for the entire house seemed to have been run over by a magic broom, it was so shining and so clean. Ardelia, her hair still in curlers, looked uneasily excited, as if she saw a possibility of being happy but hardly dared believe in it. But at sight of an Ellen with the cloud gone from her face —"looking decent," Ardelia put it mentally, she began talking in a flood of gaiety. Her clouds flew away and she could almost believe Ellen, too, rejoiced in Peleg's coming. Ardelia was always hopefully ready to believe anything. And at eleven o'clock Peleg came, in his best suit with the brightest of blue ties and a red scarf-pin,

and put his horse in the barn. Ardelia, her curls blowing, went out to welcome him and see the horse disposed of, and they hurried back together, in a breeze of cold air and accordant laughter. When Ellen heard him coming her heart seemed sickeningly to miss a beat or two. Her old childish fear of him came over her, and she lifted the stove cover and began to put in wood. No one, she thought, could expect her even to shake hands, with the stove cover off and a difficult gnarled stick to manage. But Peleg only laughed his grating laugh at her and pulled off his gloves, and Ardelia stood by, eager to take his coat and hat. But she was tremulously anxious to have the meeting propitious.

"Well, Ellen," said she, "here he is."

It sounded as if they had been awaiting him, and now were in accord in a happy consummation.

"Good morning," said Ellen, and Peleg laughed again, to show his good-will, and sat down in the kitchen, refusing to go into the sitting-room: the kitchen was "good enough" for him. He tipped back against the wall and began to pare his nails with nicety, and Ardelia regarded him in fond approval. And suddenly a weight was lifted from Ellen's heart. As it happens that we are separated long from friend or love without knowing we are apart and then a light shines in upon us and we see only the place where the friend has been, she knew Ardelia was not her mother to be snatched away from polluting ties and mourned over when she would not let herself be snatched. She seemed to herself the mother and Ardelia the poor childish thing who would have its way, and whom it would be a sin to wound in it. Ellen looked pale with the stress of her mental fighting; but she did give Ardelia a smile, and Ardelia's bliss was complete. Peleg required little entertaining. He put his knife back in his pocket, after

his eccentric task, and, still tipped against the wall, told stories. At first Ardelia listened with an uneasy eye for Ellen, lest the righteous frown should reappear. But Ellen smiled a little now and then and said Yes and No. She had heard this, or she had not heard that. She was much occupied with paring vegetables; and after they had had their early dinner, she said if they would go into the sitting-room she would clear away. They left her, and Ardelia "brashed up" the sitting-room fire, and the smell of Peleg's pipe came out to Ellen, and she worked and felt an almost passionate peace at being rid of them. A grim sense of its being funny came to her, and she wondered if Larry wouldn't understand. And she had that lightness of body and spirit which is really the exaltation of extreme pain. For sometimes when, after an extremity of physical anguish, relief is brought to us we seem to float. She made up her mind not to go in to them. She would slip out without a word. But it was not permitted, and it was Peleg who forestalled it. His squeaking boots announced him across the hall, and he stood before her.

"'Most done?" said he. "Well, your mother wants you should come in. She's got somethin' to say to you."

Instantly Ellen knew what it was, and she had a pang of pain for Ardelia who dared not tell her alone.

"Yes," she said, in a small voice. "I'll come in. Let me wipe my hands."

So Peleg left her and she stood holding the towel, as it hung, and then put one hand to her heart and whispered: "My God! my God!" and then it seemed to her it was not a large enough matter to cry to God about — God who was busy with Belgium! — and she crossed the hall after Peleg and went into the room behind him. Peleg was knocking out his pipe at the fireplace, and for the first time in her knowledge of him he looked serious.

Ardelia was flushed, her hair disordered on one side where Peleg had pressed her head to him in a reassuring caress as he had gone for Ellen. She had cried a tear or two, yet she looked gayly happy. Ellen stayed near the door, her hand on the back of a chair, and Peleg, glancing at her, was sorry for her. He thought she looked frightened.

"Well, little girl," said he, "your mother's got somethin' to tell you. Now speak your piece, Delia."

Here he did laugh a little, but Ardelia could not speak. She only looked at Ellen and seemed to be praying to her.

"Well," said Peleg, "I guess it's got to come on me. Ellie, how'd you like to have a new father?"

Ellen was silent for a moment, remembering Grissie and the day she had said the same thing. And now Peleg had said it, and she didn't want to strike him as she had wanted to strike Grissie: only she knew he must never say it again.

"You mustn't," said she, in a low tone, "say anything to me about my father."

Ardelia whimpered a little and Peleg threw her a soothing "There! there!" before he turned again to Ellen.

"'Course," said he, "I hadn't ought to said that."

"You mustn't," said Ellen, "ever. Nobody must."

She meant Ardelia, and Ardelia, understanding, whimpered again.

"Well," said Peleg, with a fictitious jollity, for after all Ellen did make him cold along the spine, "what should you say to comin' to live with me, to Bromley Wells?"

"You mean," said Ellen, "you're going to marry my mother. I know that. Now we needn't talk about it."

"O Ellen," said Ardelia, "don't you want to say anything? Don't you hope 'twill be a good thing for me? An' you, too, Ellie. I want it to be a good thing for you."

Ellen, looking at the faded coquette waiting only the smallest excuse to be again a bacchante, hated herself for her own rigidity. She wanted to go to Ardelia and throw her arms about her in the spirit Ardelia longed for, and wish her joy in the words that are for brides. Ardelia could have accepted it all in a rapture of excitement. But Ellen was bound as inexorably within the high hedge of her temperament as Ardelia in the disordered house of light affection, and she looked miserably at her mother and said nothing.

"Now," said Peleg, with a grand flourish of voice, "somethin's comin' out o' this for you. What do you s'pose your mother's done? She's had this house an' land made over to you."

"Yes, Ellie," said Ardelia appealingly, "for your use an' behoof. It ain't as if you wa'n't comin' to live with us. You be. But I know how you set by this place same's your father did — there! there! I never meant to say that. An' 'twa'n't my thought either. 'Twas Peleg's. An' there were things to do, settlin' the estate — I didn't know 'twas big enough to be an estate — an' whatever was mine in it I've made over to you. He done it though."

She turned to Peleg fondly, and Ellen, glancing at him in a misery that tried to trick itself out as gratitude, had the justice to see that he was not pluming himself on his large-mindedness but taking the stand of a sober decency.

"So," said he, "you'll have your home with us, but you'll always feel you've got one o' your own. An' when you marry, you can bring your man here 'f you want to."

Now he did cackle, but Ellen did not hate him. She saw how exceedingly well he meant, and instead she scorned herself because she could not meet him generously. Yet there was a timidity too in her withdrawal: if you met

Peleg unreservedly where would he be? She did answer, and very much like a child, in the country phrasing:

"You're real good, both of you. I can't take it, mother. But you're real good."

"'Course you'll take it," said Ardelia, holding her head high in the grandeur of having so much to give. "Ain't I goin' to have a house o' my own? An' that's as much yours as 'tis mine. He says so."

"There! there!" said Peleg. He had talked enough about his own munificence and he didn't like the look on Ellen's face. "Now I'm goin' out to harness up an' we'll all take a ride."

Ardelia got his coat and Ellen slipped away into the pantry and held her hands against her ears. She had a wounding certainty that the foolish bacchante would be kissed after the coat was on, and with it an equal certainty — and this was terrifying — that Peleg's kisses would be loud enough to pursue her through the walls between them. So she stood there, shutting her ears against him, until she dared take down her hands; then presently she heard her mother calling and telling her to hurry, and she found Ardelia in the entry with her outdoor things on. And she had left off her mourning veil.

"You ain't got on your things," said Ardelia. "Come, you hurry. His horse don't like to stand."

"I can't go," said Ellen. She opened the door, and in the haste of her passion seemed to be sweeping her mother out. "I want to study."

Ardelia, she saw, was not sorry. Who could really want a daughter who behaved, as Larry said, like a little devil? But Ardelia turned back again.

"D'you s'pose," she said, "I shall get cold 'thout my veil?"

"No," said Ellen violently, "no. Good-by."

This last was to Peleg, who was nodding jovially.

"You needn't have Larry Greene on your mind," her mother stopped to call. "I run down there 'fore breakfast, an' his flag was up."

Ellen shut the door and went into her mother's bedroom. Ardelia's open bandbox was on a chair. The cover lay on the floor, and Ellen knew the haste for pleasure that had overthrown Ardelia's ordered ways. There at the bottom of the box lay the folded mourning veil. Ardelia, in the first months of her grief, had taken a dismal pleasure in the veil. It had cost too much; but she had felt with Ellen that it was a necessity of the tragic time. Now Ellen took it out in unflinching resolution and folded it more tightly. She went back into the sitting-room where the fire was smoldering — it was the last glowing state of a great apple tree knot she and her mother had been keeping for some fine occasion — and laid it on the coals. And though Ardelia that night broke out in wonder over the loss of her veil, Ellen did not answer and Ardelia, trembling, said no more. Sometimes she was a little afraid of Ellen.

Now Ellen took down her coat and hat and went out and down the lane to Larry's. She felt quiet and sober about her mission: for at last she was to disobey the flag and walk into the house where Larry, if he were ill, needed her more than when he was well. Smilie came bounding and twisting to meet her, and she knew Larry must have been up that morning to let her out. She tapped at the door, a little sick within her, because she could not guess what she should find; and then, when he did not answer, she opened the door and walked in. But for some reason she shut Smilie out. She had a foolish feeling that Smilie must not know. The room smelled horrible to her, of stale air and liquor. There was no fire and Larry lay on

the sofa, breathing heavily. She threw the blanket rug over him, built up the fire and set the kettle on to boil. Then she found some bread and meat for Smilie, and put it out on the step, and sat down by Larry and looked at him. Could she bear to see him in his overthrow, if she had married him? She wondered, and decided that she could. The passion of woman's inborn sacrifice came upon her, the nature-implanted and most tragic desire to champion lost causes. It was the neighborhood attitude, she knew, to consider him sinful and degraded. But she thought him still Larry, though strangely changed. And after the kettle had boiled and she had put it back and had sat perhaps an hour more by the fire, he woke and saw her brooding there. It seemed a long time before right knowledge came to him of what the vision really was, because he had never before risen from his abyss to find a human creature. But now, as he came more and more to himself, he saw that this was no part of a dream, as it had been before, but Ellen who had broken through the invisible walls. As he sat up and put his hands to his face to shut her out — and it looked as if he raised them most pathetically to eyes that must be weeping behind them — he said to himself: "Horrible! oh, horrible!"

"I'll make some tea," said Ellen.

She brought it to him, and he drank it without looking at her. The wonder in his mind was that a creature who kept poor Ardelia in a state of nervous overthrow could yet stand here beside him warmly maternal and as strong as dawn. When he had given the cup back to her, he said:

"Now go home, child. And never come here again, never alone. Better, never at all."

"I am going to get your dinner," said Ellen. "We had chicken, and I brought you some."

He did not forbid her, but went off to his room and bathed and came down decent, and he ate what she set out for him, and Smilie was let in and joyously curled herself up on her lounge and slept without even a blinking eye. She had abandoned anxiety until the next mysterious upheaval.

"He came," said Ellen, finally. "And I was good."

Larry could not talk to her. He looked at her when she was not looking and adored her with his eyes. She told him more about Peleg, and, though it was hard to do that, about her mother's giving her the place. That roused him and they talked, quite in their old way, of her taking it. He thought she should take it, and it was plain she wanted to, plain she was going to love it in place of her mother who was not quite her mother now, with kind, hated Peleg between them. And when she had cleared away the dinner and brushed up the hearth, Larry said:

"Now run home. And I'll come to see you. But don't come here again."

Ellen put on her coat, and then went to him and like a child put up her face to be kissed. It was the divineness of her belief in him, whether he was in his abyss or out of it, that shook him now. He saw she was saying, "You are the same Larry, and I am your Ellen." But he did not kiss her.

"I couldn't be quite such a blackguard, dear," he said. "Now run. And Ellen"— she had turned away, not hurt but taking him on faith, and sure he had understood what she meant as well without the kiss —"just take down that flag, will you? And carry it home with you."

"What shall I do with it?" Ellen began; but the look on his face, the desperate brightness of it, told her a part, at least, of what he meant.

"Cut along," said he, "and ask your mother to come in the morning and neat me up."

She went, with a little nod at him; and he stood listening until he heard the click of her pulling down the flag. Then he went to the window and looked after her. She was going along the path, the flag above her shoulder, upright and fluttering. It looked triumphant. Larry drew a great breath. His eyes were hot and hurt him. He went over to Smilie and flapped one of her ears to call her attention, and Smilie glanced drowsily up at him and told him he was a god among men.

"It's mighty queer, old girl," said Larry. "Do you suppose we can fetch it?"

He believed Smilie looked as though they could.

"But you're an optimist, old girl," said Larry. "You always were."

XXV

Ben was gone a week and his mother did not hear from him until he wrote briefly asking her to send Trueman to meet him at the train. He had not been out of her sight so long since he was born, and when he came she was enchantingly moved. She stood at the door to receive him, her face quivering, eager to get him within reach of her hand, though it was a timid hand, given to service, not caresses. Perhaps she was thinking, too, of Hugh, so far from her and in an unimagined world. Ben was incidental in his greeting and briefly surprised to find her making such a matter of it. He looked curiously tanned and reddened, but jaded, and was plainly cross; and when she radiantly asked him to tell her all about it, he said there was nothing to tell. He had been to the theater.

"Was it a good play?" she asked, rather timidly: for she felt ignorant before her clever sons.

"No," he said, "musical comedy. Stupid, too."

"I guess 'twas because you had to go alone," Mary said fondly, her hand on his arm. But he slipped away from it, to go upstairs and change into his every-day clothes, because, she told him, he'd better step in at once to see his father. Neale had been looking at her lately in a sterner inquiry, and she thought the look meant Ben.

"D'you see Grissie?" she asked, while his foot was on the lowest stair, and he stopped and turned to her and she thought his look was strange, solemn and somehow old.

"No," said he. "Yes, I did, too, but only a minute. It didn't amount to anything."

His mother wondered if there was something wrong with Grissie.

"Is she pleasantly situated?" she asked. And then Ben's face cleared, as if he found some haunting care not so serious after all, and he told her Grissie was all right, and went on upstairs, whistling. He came down presently, and went into the room where his father lay watching the door. He sat down by the bed and began at once on the tale Trueman had just told him, of a disastrous trade Squire Greene had made with a swappity-horse Frenchman, and the drama and retribution of it wiped out the seeking look in Neale's eyes and planted there fires of a grim appreciation. And if he had wondered where his son had been, he was now only relieved to get him home again.

After supper it proved that Ben had brought his mother a present: a pin with a blue stone. She took it and looked at it in great pride over her son for stinting himself to give her the charming trifle. It could have no value, Mary knew, he had so little money; but it was precious to her because he brought it. And then Ben ran up and tapped at Aunt Tab's door and gave her too a pin: only her stone was red, and it was more showy than his mother's, held by a setting of twisted strands. Aunt Tab opened the white box and stood enraptured over the drop of red in the circling gold. And as if he could not bear thanks and longed to get away, Ben left her adoring it and ran down and out at the front door and over to Ellen's. She and her mother were at the table, sewing. Ellen was making her mother's wedding dress. It was not in kindness perhaps, not in self-sacrifice; it was in that odd, exalted mood she had taken on of late, as if she realized that life, though a mysterious drama, must be played. Neither she nor Ardelia had spoken of it to each other as a wedding dress. Only Ardelia had one day said entreatingly:

"I 'most think I'll get me a gray cotton crêpe."

Ellen had not answered; but when Ardelia brought it home, they had begun making it together, and Ardelia felt soothed and humbly grateful. Ben sat with them until she went upstairs to find some lace, and as soon as he heard her steps overhead, he leaned across the table to Ellen and spoke eagerly:

"D'you know where I've been?"

"Your mother was in," said Ellen. "She said you'd gone to Boston. To look round."

"Ellen," said he — now a flush had come into his jaded face and his eyes were bright — "I've brought you a present." He put his hand in his pocket and took out a ring. It had no stone, and Ellen thought it looked like Mrs. Peterson's wedding ring. Her mother had never worn one, and she gazed at it in awe, as something significant and rich.

"Let me have your hand," said Ben, "quick. I want to see if it fits."

But Ellen asked, for no clear reason:

"Did you see Grissie?"

Ben frowned blackly. He looked like Hugh in one of his somber moods.

"Yes," he said. "But she didn't know about this."

"That wouldn't make any difference," said Ellen. "I don't want it, Ben, thank you just as much."

Ben drew back his hand and dropped the ring into his pocket.

"I don't see," he said, "what puts the devil into things. I didn't want to go to Boston. But I went. I never want to go again. Don't you know what we talked about the last time I was here, Ellie? It was about our being married."

"That was silly," said Ellen sedately. She held up a

breadth and pulled it a little, to get the crinkles to run properly. She thought he would be surprised if he knew what a grown-up womanly person he was talking to, one who was making a wedding dress quite calmly — who might perhaps marry Larry Greene. That seemed to Ellen a dignified adventure. Ben looked very young to her, and all his desires of love idle and immature.

"I want it settled now," said he, in a fever of haste and seriousness. "I want to know I've got you and nobody can come between us."

Ellen smiled at him her cool, lovely smile. Somebody had come between them, she was thinking. The stranger had been between them and now it was Larry Greene. But she could not tell him, for he would laugh, knowing there was nothing to worry about, if it was only old Larry. He flung out of the room and Ardelia, coming back with her box of lace, forgot him in the absorption of wondering whether she could mend the scallops and whether a tinge of tea in the water would give it the right hue. But when they had laid their work aside and sat for a moment before the fire that was too beguiling to leave, Ardelia ventured to tell her tale, Ellen had been so dear and tolerant.

"I talked it over with Larry to-day," said she, turning her skirt up and hitching to the stove to warm her knees luxuriously. "I told him we should be out o' here in a matter of a few weeks, an' he seemed to be prepared. He said he'd mentioned it to Mis' Gleason an' she's agreed to do for him."

So, Ellen knew, it was to be in a few weeks. Her task of being good looked suddenly harder. For a time it had been an abstract mother marrying a hated but abstract Peleg. Looking at Ardelia, sensuously warming her knees, she wondered at the cruelty of the unimaginative mind.

Her mother did not want to hurt her, yet she was hurting her villainously. And if Ellen was not careful, she was going to hurt back again. She got up and lighted her candle.

"I shouldn't think Mis' Gleason'd be much of a housekeeper," she said.

"Well," said Ardelia, rising, and going to wind the clock, "she's a good cook, only give her somethin' to do *with*. An' he's neat as wax."

She drowsed off to bed, and Ellen stood looking at the fire. She called Larry in her heart so loudly that she half expected him to come. Her old mood was upon her of loneliness and black unfriended night. He was not going to summon her to him. He had engaged Mrs. Gleason to do his work. It looked to Ellen as if she had got into a lonesome world.

XXVI

There was one miserable morning when Ardelia called to Ellen after breakfast and quavered something about the household magazine she had been reading and the directions it gave for making a wedding bell. It could be of tissue paper or of flowers. Anyway it was a bell and the bridal pair stood under it. And Ellen looked back at her in such horror that Ardelia, seeing her white face and widened eyes, was herself afraid of what she had done. The mother instinct never for a minute weakened in Ardelia, though she was far along a road that led her from old fealties. She still could not see why she should be denied the two perfectly natural possessions of a husband and the child who had power to hurt her so. Once she even had the grotesque feeling that if David were alive he would understand perfectly. And perhaps it was true. Now, meeting Ellen's look, she immediately retreated from her pursuit of bridal elegance and tried to make all well again.

"But there," she said, "I guess we needn't concern ourselves with that. He said we'd ride over to Beckenham — I told him I didn't want Mr. Peterson, he's so terrible solemn — an' go right to Bromley Wells. He'll come in the two-seated wagon so's we can all go."

Ellen dropped her lids over the somber eyes, and Ardelia drew a breath of relief, now that the reproach of them was veiled. And Ellen said nothing but, later in the forenoon when her mother was upstairs looking over old clothing to be discarded, as not suited to the house with the

tower, she ran across the orchard to Mary Neale. Mary was standing on a little island of dry grass, under a cherry tree in bud. She wore a dress that had faded, in many washings, to a wonderful blue, and her eyes had taken color from it, and the serene beauty of her face made an extraordinary picture. She had been reading the paper to Neale, and the strain of not knowing whether he wanted her to do it had suddenly made her breathless and she had come out for unhindered air. The sight of her was at once calming to Ellen. She went up to her and said in a quiet way what would once have cost her the anguish of tears to utter:

"Mrs. Neale, my mother is going to be married."

Mary looked at her a moment in a grave understanding. She saw no reason for making light of it.

"Let's walk down the road a piece," she said. "I love this air, don't you?"

So they wandered away from the possibility of being overheard, and as they paced back and forth in the sun, Ellen said:

"My mother has made over the place to me. And I thought I'd tell you if Mr. Neale wants to buy it now, he can."

Mary's heart did give a responsive beat. She forgot Ellen for that instant and remembered only that Neale, bankrupt of fortune, might reap at least this one of his desires. But she came back at once to Ellen.

"Now," said she, "what makes you think of selling it?"

"I want some money to live on," said Ellen. "I won't take it all. Mother's giving it to me wouldn't make any difference about that. Only she wants me to live with her. And I can't."

"No," said Mary softly, "of course you couldn't — not yet."

"It's so queer," said Ellen, "not to know how to plan. I could sleep in the house, you see, and board myself on what I get from the hospital. But mother wouldn't let me. She'd keep coming over and begging me not to."

"No," said Mary again, "of course she mustn't do that."

"I could work out," said Ellen, "at Beckenham. Or maybe I could get a place in an office, if I went away. But I don't know how. Maybe Grissie'd tell me, only I don't want to ask her."

"If you'd work out," said Mary, "would you come and stay with me, and do all you could, besides your hospital work, while you looked round and made up your mind? You see Hannah has double to do now Mr. Neale is sick. I shall have to get some one, and I didn't know where to turn. I should admire to have you."

Ellen at once looked to Mary Neale like the little Ellen that used to wear pink pinafores and tag about after her father in a rapture of pleasure in the sun and wind.

"Could I?" said she. "Could I work for my board?"

"Not that," said Mary. "You're worth more than your board. I should pay you what I'd pay anybody."

"Could I get my things picked up," said Ellen, "and come suddenly? I mean, if I wanted to walk out of the house?"

"You could come any minute," said Mary. "There's your mother at the gate, looking for you, just as she used to. You run tell her."

Ellen couldn't do anything so pliable. How could she run to Ardelia who was thinking of tissue bells? She walked stiffly along, and once she glanced back and saw Mary Neale standing before the gate, breathing the air of liberty before she went in to the air of doubt. She looked of a heroic size, and her blue dress seemed the color of

beauty and peace, and something in Ellen's heart softened, so that she could go on and tell Ardelia quite simply that she was going to work for Mary Neale. But Ardelia did not consider it a simple thing. She put her apron to her eyes and ran into the house, and there Ellen found her lamenting, in a sincere and childlike way, as she lamented when her husband died. And Ellen had a moment of impetuous belief that Ardelia was, in a tragic manner, choosing between her and Peleg, and knew she could not refuse the sacrifice. She was for that moment joyously certain she could make it up to Ardelia if she would forego the loathly dream.

"To think," Ardelia wept, rocking back and forth, "that Mary Neale should come betwixt me an' my own child."

And presently, her face tear-sodden and red, she went over to Mary Neale's, and came back half an hour later, so wistful in her seeking looks that Ellen wondered what had happened. But she never knew. And that evening Ardelia, as if she needed something to comfort her, took out the wedding dress and made a feint of arranging the lace a little differently, and Ellen knew the renunciation of Peleg was not to be. So, with her heart a turmoil of angry pride because he had told her not to come and yet she could not keep away, she went over to see Larry. He was not in his house, nor was Smilie anywhere about. She went in and did some deft little things about the room, and then sat down at the hearth and waited. The hylas were thrilling through the dusk. Spring was vibrant with them, pervasive little masters of melancholy. They moved her to sadness, vague hopes and yearnings, but chiefly to the wistful pain that means only youth. Larry, coming in from one of his trips to Beckenham, where he went to talk about the war, started to find the silent fig-

ure in his room. Yet she was always there really, the loved image of her breaking the shadow of evil that was doing in the world and would not be exorcised.

"Have you had your supper?" asked Ellen.

Yes, he told her, he had had it at Beckenham. Somehow he couldn't wait for the morning mail. He had to have the night's news also. And he had brought a letter from Hugh, intended now for print, because Hugh knew his letters were incredibly worth it. Hugh was smiling over there at the joke of the newspapers wanting what cost him no trouble to do. He had found nothing in his life so easy.

Larry got Smilie a drink and then sat down to read the letter. It was a triumph of simple writing, warmth in it, wonder, and the heart of youth. Again Hugh talked about colors and trees and skies and the feel of life and the men he knew — abstractly this, for he guessed with the nice instinct of the artist what he must not say. Ellen found it beautiful; but since she had never tried to put the appearance of life into words, she did not know how supreme an excellence it is to do it, and she could not see why Larry should be so enraptured by it. But Hugh did bring the far country before her; more than that, he made it so vivid that the poor troubles of her day looked dim to her and nothing was real but the battlefield where young men fought that evil should not win. The Reverend John Peterson was accustomed to tell her, when she went to church, that there was no glory in war; but her soul passionately denied him. For, granting the unclean beast had risen, she knew there was something glorious in men's vowing away their lives because they loved something better. These men loved England, loved France, loved the earth that had nourished them so much that they would not see it spoiled for them who were to come after.

At this moment, perhaps because Larry was moved by the drama of life, so that his mind was set on eternal things, she was inconceivably stirred by the glory of it, and she said hotly:

"I wish you and I were there."

"I wish so, too," said Larry. He laid down the letter and let his hand rest on it as if he loved it, the beautiful violin-playing hand Ellen was never tired of watching. "What could we do? What could I do? If I were a younger man —" He stopped and a spasm ran across his face. Middle-age was grinning at him from every path. "Do you see nemesis in it, Nell? Not punishment, not the anger of the gods, but just reaction, the penalty I've earned by my own deeds. If I had never put out the flag — where is the flag, Nell?"

She flushed in shame for him. She hated to have him remember it. But she answered steadily:

"Over my looking-glass."

"Good girl! Well, if I'd never put out the flag, if Smilie and I had minded our book and had ambitions, we might have been somewhere now, mightn't we, Smilie?" Smilie, wrinkling her brows, looked over at him from her couch, but concluded it was not important enough for a wag. "And people would have listened to us then, the town, the county, oh, yes, the state and even the damned neutrals in high places. And we could have run over the country like a herd of buffaloes, Smilie barking and I bellowing, and we should have done much good. But now when I go to Beckenham and hold forth from a cracker-barrel, they laugh and tell me the country never was so prosperous, and that the quarrel between man and the devil isn't our quarrel, and Germany's a long way off."

"I wish we were over there," said Ellen broodingly.

"I'll tell you," said Larry, "what I wished last night.

I wished it so hard I dreamed it really happened. I wished the next time you and I came to this earth we could come together and be men — young, lean, brown, sinewy men — and range over the earth and see the glory of it."

"I don't know," said Ellen shyly, "as I want to be a man. I guess I'll be a girl again."

"No," said Larry, "no. Don't do it. I'm tired of the way it is now, tired, Nell, tired. Love of women! I haven't had it, and God knows now I don't want it, really. I dare say it's bitter in the mouth. But I don't want to lose you, and I'd like to think sometime we two were going to know the old earth better than we do now, fight for her, maybe die for her."

It was comforting to know he didn't want to lose her. The unfriended feeling she had when he told her she was grown up enough to stay away from him, slipped from her and she felt herself back in the house of comprehending love that had stood her in such stead when her father died. Now she told him about Ardelia's marriage, and that she was going to Mary Neale, and he nodded gravely and said that was the best thing.

"Hugh'd like to think you were with his mother," he concluded, and she considered that a minute, and then agreed. She hardly ever thought of Hugh unless she was reminded.

XXVII

Strange, Larry thought, how the waves of war were washing up the dross of this western world with a force hardly diminished from that it was flinging over the east. He had begun to escape his first terror of the incarnation of evil in his lift of exultation over the Marne; now he was increasingly assured. It was not to be allowed its horrible course. Something was withstanding it, something invincible because it marched with the integrity that made the world. And as he followed the course of the evil day by day, his mind was now on America, to see how she took it, whether her ancient honor was safe, like the shield and sword hung up before the altar but ready to be taken down at need. He was going about the township talking and listening. The Reverend John Peterson was always ready to discourse, in a way of angry militancy, about the holiness of peace at any price, and Mrs. Peterson knit like lightning, every needle flash a stab. And old Sally Wheeler still drove here and there in the chaise and bade women work, and men get ready to fight and vote, and insulted them when they looked vacuous and unready. There was nothing, it seemed, Sally Wheeler wouldn't say in those days; she was as full of epithets as the dictionary. But nobody paid much attention. She was, they thought, like Larry Greene, "possessed about the war." And there was still her relief group that wound bandages and received contributions and her class at the little hospital for First Aid. But what amazed Larry most was the astounding capacity of

the country for swallowing platitudes. It had red facts before it, and yet all but an unswerving contingent were standing on tiptoe to be neutral even in thought. It was straining itself to be broad-minded. He was not surprised at the derelictions of the politician playing for votes or capital and labor itching to fill their individual pockets; but he was distraught over the inertness of the good. Were they really so fanatically good that high-sounding words could wipe out the facts of the gray-green river in Belgium and cover the filth and outrage and barbarian lust as if it had never been? He longed to persuade, to fight, to pull down time-serving officials from high places. But he was not a man of sufficient consequence. He could only fume in the newspapers, with the depleting certainty that locally he was "only Larry Greene." He could hear them add "possessed about the war."

One day in the early part of the year, a day untimely in its warmth, when the dirt-veined snow lay in patches, and hens on sunny slopes prated of spring, old Sally Wheeler came for him in the chaise and asked him to drive a little way while they talked things over. She would bring him back, but she had decided feelings about sitting in the house while such heavenly air, full of the odors of earth and buds, could be had with the concurrence of Henry and the chaise. She was a patchwork of an old woman to-day, with her bonnet on one side, an ancient cloak and a cashmere scarf about her throat. But a gentlewoman: no one ever doubted that. The beautiful hands with their old-fashioned rings were very eloquent, and her every motion was that of a woman of breeding. First she wanted to talk about Ellen, who was a lovely girl, she said, and ought to be separated from her silly mother.

"She's going to be," said Larry, and told her about Ardelia's coming nuptials.

"What possesses the creature?" asked she, slapping the reins on Henry's back when he stopped and looked mildly round at her. "It's indecent. The man sold me a frying-pan."

"There's no harm in him," said Larry, as he had told Ellen. "You wouldn't blame him for selling a frying-pan."

"The girl could come and live with me," said Sally Wheeler.

"She's going to live with Mrs. Neale."

"Well, that's better; perhaps the long-legged son will marry her."

"Lord!" said Larry. He had been lounging in the chaise, but now he came upright. "What awful things you do think of."

"Don't you want him to?" asked Sally Wheeler shrewdly. "Go along, Henry. You're going to Beckenham. Yes, that's where you're going. Now isn't he knowing? After I've told him, he goes right along. Perhaps you'd rather I'd send her to France with my nurses — I believe she knows enough now — and let her find the other Neale boy and marry him over there."

"Yes," said Larry soberly. "If she's got to marry, I'd rather she'd marry him."

But she had other things to talk about, things she'd come for.

"Larry, why don't you get some money out of your brother, for the relief? Abial's rich as that mud. No, Henry dear, I didn't tell you to put your foot in it. That's a hole."

"Brother Abial's a tight-wad," said Larry. "He's going to carry it with him."

"Hasn't he money laid by? I asked them at the bank, but they wouldn't tell me. They grinned though, from the cashier down."

"'Course he's got money; but you can't get it out of him."

"Have you tried, man? have you tried?"

"No," said Larry. "What's the use?"

"If he was my brother," said Sally Wheeler, "I'd break into his house and sit on him till he gave me a bond."

"Well," said Larry, "I hadn't thought of it; but now you speak of it, I rather guess I will. 'S'pose you let me get down here."

She combated that, but realizing how hard it would be, if Henry were once set homeward, to turn him back again, she let Larry, in his rubber boots, go clumping away through the mud. Larry thought tremendously hard while he walked back. He had no brawn to give the war and no brains of any degree worth counting; but he had Brother Abial. He would give him. The fancy pleased him. He began his mission in a pious frame of mind. He had wished for the apostolic fervor to knock at hearts all over this lukewarm township. He felt now as if he were going to put past ironies behind him and pound at the door of Brother Abial's heart. When he clumped up the driveway, Abial had just got home from marketing and was on his way to the house, his hands full of parcels. Larry saluted him, before he remembered how good he meant to be, with his ironically deferential two fingers to his cap, and Abial gave an oblique and grudging nod. He continued on his way to the kitchen, and Larry followed him, in that exasperating fashion of assuming a right in his old home.

"Sit down here," said Abial. "Clara's gone over to Mary Neale's."

It was a great low-studded kitchen with an enormous fireplace where the range stood now, and square, small-paned windows. Larry, looking about it, forgot for an instant that there was an elderly Abial before him, waiting for him to speak, and could have believed his mother would be calling from another room. Abial had seated himself in one of the straight-backed chairs by the window, and was staring at him enquiringly.

"Well?" said he.

Larry turned to him with his engaging smile. It was never more so than when he had that to offer which Abial was certain to reject.

"'Bial," said he, "I want you to do something to make your name known all over New England. I want you to give something to the war."

"Look here," said the Squire, "I've had this in mind to say to you for some time past. If you don't stop talkin' war an' thinkin' war, you'll lose what little sense you've got. An' I ain't the only one that says so."

"I can't give much myself," said Larry. "I'm living too near the wind. But you're rich, 'Bial. You've got all father had and more. I want you to fork over. I'll put it down in the history of Bromley that Abial Greene, known at that time as 'the squire,' donated five hundred dollars to the relief fund."

Abial grunted and warmed a hand at the stove where the fire had gone out.

"You can talk," said he, "till you're older'n you be now, but you won't get five hunderd dollars out o' me. No, nor five dollars, nor five cents. I'm neutral, same as our President, an' you'd better be, too."

Whether it was the word, which was now anathema to him, Larry did not know, but suddenly he found himself back at his old moorings. A minute ago, he had been floating over them in the mist of philanthropic splendor. He had been knocking at the door of Abial's heart. But now he saw Abial had no heart, save an organ technically devoted to the circulation of the blood, and that the only knocking to do Abial any good would be at his fears and vanities. And at once he felt light and happy because he was going into the fight with known weapons, and his blood was up.

"'Bial," said he, "do you remember the night father died?"

Abial turned a questioning glance on him, the glint of his cold eyes under frowning brows.

"Yes," said he, after a pause, "I remember it well enough."

"Father'd made his will," said Larry, "and given you this house and all his money — all but five hundred dollars."

"He give you that," said Abial. He was carrying it off according to such humor as he understood. "You can pass that along, if you're so anxious to."

"No, I can't," said Larry. "It's eaten up."

"Drunk up, too, I guess," said Abial, with a second ebullition of humor.

"Drunk up, too," said Larry, unmoved. "We can eat — and drink — a good deal in the course of twenty years or more. Well, 'Bial, father repented just before he died. You know what he said."

Abial's eyes narrowed. They looked shifty, and evaded in a crafty haste.

"Father was unconscious," said he, "for several hours before he passed away."

"He said to you, 'You keep the place, but divide the rest with Lawrence.' 'Bial, you never did that."

"The will," said Abial, "was carried out in every partic'lar, as he wrote it: every single partic'lar, every ioty."

"But what father said to you by word of mouth — that wasn't carried out."

"A legal dockiment," said the squire, "is a legal dockiment." His thin face became suddenly charged with color. His brow was black and ugly. "If you think you can make trouble for me about anything that was said by word o' mouth, you're mistaken."

"Do you remember who was there?" asked Larry. "Mary Neale was there, and Foxy Gleason. They'd come in to help, that night. Mary Neale said to me afterward, 'I haven't forgotten what your father said that night. I never shall forget, and any time you want me, I'll speak."

"What'd you say?" asked Greene. The question leaped from him.

"I told Mary you'd carried out the will in every particular, and that you weren't bound to do anything more."

"Ah!" said Greene. It was the snarl he had for a defeated bargainer. "You ain't so much of a fool as I thought."

"Gleason spoke of it only the other day," said Larry. "I met him in the road and he said, 'D'your brother ever carry out the old squire's wishes?'"

"What's the use o' your comin' up here tryin' to brew trouble about things the law don't take cognizance of?" said Greene violently.

"But there's something that does," said Larry. "Public opinion does. Do you want it aired in the papers? You're never going to represent us at the State House, 'Bial, if you're that kind of a fellow. The farmer back

there behind the Ridge is a tight wad, too; but he's a moralist, at least when it concerns somebody else's cash. He wouldn't say you're a good brother, 'Bial. Then there's Tabbie Neale's lot." This was a shot at a venture, but it told. Greene sat immovable, but Larry saw his hands clench and the muscles in them start and the knuckles whiten. "I've often thought," said Larry, "I might have to tell the story of Tabbie's lot. In print, you know. To one of the papers. I might put it into the history. I've got quite a chapter of anecdotes. I've no shame, you know, 'Bial. I don't care a hang about the family name. I tell you what I'll do. I'll hold my tongue for Tabbie's lot." The idea took hold on him and gained in brilliancy. He got up, and smiled on 'Bial. "By George!" said he, "that's what I'll do it for — Tabbie's lot. No five hundred for the Allies. Only Tabbie's lot. And if I sell it — as I should — and give the Allies the money — as I should — I'll hand you over the credit of the contribution. Don't you call that handsome?"

Abial got to his feet and stood there, quivering.

"Do you understand what you're talkin' about?" he asked. "Do you know what that lot's worth?"

"Yes," said Larry. "Just as well as you know what you paid for it. Come, 'Bial, be a sport. You're going to get the credit of giving away a number of thousand in a lot you paid only eleven hundred for. And you're going to walk right up into public esteem. Folks are bound to talk about you, especially the folks at Beckenham that are working for the Allies themselves. You're nothing but a plain farmer to-day. You'll be a philanthropist."

Some men prize the glory of walking in a procession when their noble order, of one sort or another, marches,

topped by ostrich plumes, and each may be presumed to have, not unworthily, his private vanity. Abial did see a vision, at that moment, of his own entrance to a plane hitherto denied him. He saw Lawyer Pettis stopping him in the street and inquiring if he didn't think they were marking time in the House. He saw himself again a candidate, having drawn the eye of the world to his shining qualities. And he regarded Larry, who had summoned the vision, with a scornful tolerance. It was the nearest article he had at hand to the angry tribute he always paid men who were shrewder than he.

"Well," said he, "I might give a little money. I don't say I sha'n't. But I should give it in my own time an' in my own way."

"No," said Larry. "You'll give precisely that one thing. You'll give Tabbie's lot, and you'll give it to me, and trust me to fight fair. You trust me, you know, 'Bial. You know I wouldn't feather my own nest. You think I'm too much of a fool."

"Yes," said Abial, "you're a good deal of a fool."

"So that's where it stands," said Larry. "You carry out my father's dying wish by making over to me the one thing you've got that I want. And it isn't a tenth part, you know, of what my father really meant. Or — say you don't. Say you're such a fool you don't. You're a good deal of a fool, too, 'Bial — different brand from me. Well, into print you go, and when you're once in print you'll stay there. Life sentence — no commutation can get you out. Good-by. You have your answer ready for me. I'll call round."

He smiled at his brother, broadly, happily, as one who held the situation in his hand and gaily knew it. And Abial, watching him away down the drive, cursed his brother in his heart.

XXVIII

Ardelia's two trunks were packed and waiting, and Ellen, after she once saw them in the sitting-room where they had been brought on a day when she was not at home, went into that room no more. She knew Ardelia was flying up and downstairs with armfuls of clothing, but she did not really see her plainly, there was such a mist before her eyes, a darkness of unimagined things. And she had at her heart that hard ache which is never so terrible as in youth when it is actually like the conjectured pain of dropping blood. Drop by drop her heart seemed to be dripping away its life. Peleg had not been near the house for a long time now, and she wondered numbly if her mother had told him not to come, and thought she needn't have troubled, since it would all be over soon. This forenoon when Ardelia seemed more excited than usual and flew about the house, confirming it in an order it had worn for several days, Mary Neale came to the back door and called to Ellen. Ardelia, instead of staying to meet her, went almost at a run into the sitting-room, and Ellen heard the closing of the door. She wondered why her mother did not want to see Mary Neale.

"Ellen," said Mary, with an odd kind of authority in her voice, "I'd like you to come over and help me a spell. Mr. Neale is having a good day and Hannah's cleaning, and I thought you and I could go over two or three of the closets."

"I'll tell mother," said Ellen, but Mary Neale put out her hand and drew her down the steps.

"No," said she, "I saw your mother last night, and we talked it over. Come right along with me."

And since Ellen had no wish to go into the sitting-room where the trunks were, she did go with Mary, and Mary talked steadily, as they went across the orchard, about wanting to get the cleaning done with as little trouble to Mr. Neale as possible, and depending on Ellen for the lighter tasks. They had a busy day and to Ellen somehow an exciting one. Ben was in and out laughing and joking and pretending to clean closets, and his mother, Ellen thought, seemed to encourage him in his silliness. And though she was working, everybody had the air of entertaining her, in a way, and even Hannah, who was so dumb to the ordinary intercourse of life, appeared with warm cookies in the middle of the forenoon and quite solemnly pressed her to try them. It was between three and four that afternoon when Mary came to her in the east chamber where she was looking over old linen for the Allies and spoke to her, in a voice so peculiarly arresting in its soft sweetness that Ellen stopped folding at once and turned to her, every drop of blood forsaking her face and her heart a panic of fear. She knew what was coming, and why the day had been arranged for her, and why Ben had been encouraged to make her laugh.

"I thought," said Mary, "you and I had better go over to your house before dark and get your nightie. The key is under the stone."

It seemed to Ellen that she stood there a long time before she could answer. Then she asked quietly:

"Is it over?" as she might have asked about a painful death.

"Yes," said Mary. "Your mother came in to see me last night, and we concluded this was the best way. And she cried, Ellen. She cried and cried."

Ellen stood fingering the hem of a linen sheet. She looked at it, too, with an extreme intentness, as if it concerned her deeply.

"No," said she, at last. "You needn't go. I'll go over alone. I'd rather."

"I can't —" said Mary. There she stopped a minute. The mother in her was stretching its arms to the child in Ellen, and she didn't know how to let her see the arms were ready. She was a little afraid of the child's remoteness. "I can't let you, Ellen," she ended. But as Ellen's brows came together a little at that, as if she were being worried, Mary gave up instantly. "You go then," said she. "And hurry back. I've got all these things round, and I want to finish up before dark."

Ellen went steadily out and across the orchard, to the house that was now hers. She had never loved it so much, because it could sit there and wait for her to come home to it. And definitely and quite simply it seemed to her that her father, too, was there. She took the key from under the stone, and opened the door and went in. Ardelia had left the window up, so that the air was blowing sweetly through. Ellen understood now her mother's passion for setting the house in order these last days. She had wanted it to be friendly to Ellen who was left. She did not have to go upstairs. On the table where she had sat studying while her mother sewed, was a little pile of clothing beside the basket to put it in: Ellen's best nightie, she noted, handkerchiefs and her modest toilet things. And with them was a little strip of paper frantically scrawled: "Come soon. Please come soon. I'll come after you when you say the word. I'll come alone."

It was not signed. Ardelia had not needed to sign it. And Ellen folded it carefully and laid it in the basket with her clothes. Somehow, she knew, Ardelia loved her unchangingly, though she had found it in herself to do this inexplicable thing. She pulled down the window, lest there should be a shower, and locked the door and put the key under the stone. She could not bear to take it away. It seemed as if her mother might at any minute wake from her nightmare and escape from horrible Peleg and come home. And then she must find the key.

When Ellen, carrying her little basket, got into the orchard, she found Mary Neale waiting for her, and they went back to the house together.

"To-morrow is your hospital day, isn't it?" asked Mary, in the most commonplace interest, as if they had always planned their time together. "Trueman can take you. He's going to get the colt shod."

Ellen in her chamber that night — it was on the farther side, so that it did not overlook the little house — felt tired, but not at all strange. She had never slept a night away from home and there was something piquing in the difference. She heard Ben go up to bed, and he stopped at her door and said, "Night!" in a funny gruff voice low enough to escape his father's ears. She slept hard, and dreamed. First it was of the stranger who seemed especially pleased to find her here: for all through the dream she was conscious of being in an alien place. Then it was of the little house, which seemed most friendly and not sad at finding itself forsaken. It was the little house, but still it was very large, with a great many rooms she had not seen before. And all the rooms were full of people. One was her father, and she had that sense she always had in dreams, of his coming back for a time and of her exquisite relief and happiness

at seeing him. And the other people seemed to be like him, in some vague way, and she concluded they were all Brocks who had gone to that mysterious place where father lived now, and that they, too, had come back out of the kind and beautiful impulse of love for the little house.

In the morning she woke to a quickened interest in her changed life, and so it went on. Ben was delightful to her, in a protecting yet boyish fashion, and they laughed a great deal, always in pantomime when they were where Neale could hear them, and went driving off to town on Ellen's hospital days. Ellen never knew whether Thomas Neale had been told she was in the house; but knowledge of his old dislike kept her voice subdued and her step went lightly past his door. She had spoken once more to Mary Neale about selling him the little house, but Mary had only looked perplexed and said she didn't know; they must leave it a while till they saw what 'twas right to do. There was one dreadful day when Ardelia came driving over from Bromley Wells in the shining buggy, to beg Ellen to come at least to spend Sunday in the house with the latticed pillars, and "get wonted," Ardelia said pathetically, so that she would come next time for good. But Ellen slipped at once into her old manner, which Ardelia called within her heart contrariness, and lost the placidity she seemed to have been learning from Mary Neale. No, she told her mother, no. And she would not even qualify it by the "not yet" Ardelia's pathos demanded of her. The truth was that she wanted her mother to be happy and yet, when she saw Ardelia's actual content, she could not bear the sight of it. Ardelia was greatly improved by her marriage. Now that the uncertainties of courtship were over, she did not bridle, and had no occasion, even when she timidly spoke of Peleg, to look silly once. She had a new hat

and pongee coat, and they were of a decent suitability; but Ellen remembered they were bought with Peleg's money and felt the indignity of it. Ardelia had a little package in her hand, and she timidly introduced it just before she went. It was a few handkerchiefs for Ellen, she said. She had wanted to buy her a hat. "But," she added, with a humility that would have melted anything but a stony Ellen, "I thought we better go together, so you could pick it out."

Ellen did get through the interview without a too patent betrayal of her old contrary self. She went out to the wagon with her mother and helped her in, having kissed her good-by with a fierce dutifulness that comforted Ardelia, since it had the force, if not the sweetness, of love. But when she returned to the house, Mary Neale found her at the kitchen stove, ready to drop in the little package of handkerchiefs. Mary went to her and took the parcel from her hand.

"Ellen," said she sternly, "you're a naughty girl. If you don't want 'em, you can give 'em to France."

"Yes," said Ellen. She did not seem taken aback by the severity of Mary's voice: only relieved to find there was a decent way out. "I will. I'd like to."

"I'll put 'em in my bundle," said Mary. "I never've done up that linen we picked out to send. But, Ellen, you've got a good mother. You never'll know how she feels towards you till you've had children of your own."

This was a good deal for Mary Neale to say, and when she saw Ellen afterward, a forlorn little figure sitting by the kitchen window as if she lacked strength to go on with her light tasks, she repented and wondered if she had said too much. Ellen, while she sat there, was resisting temptation. She wanted to wash away the kiss her mother had given her, because it seemed to have

come direct from Peleg. But that, she knew, would be the act of an unpardonable degree of naughtiness.

It was on a spring day after this that Mary Neale stole out of the room when Thomas seemed to be sleeping. He slept a great deal now, or he kept his eyes closed to defend himself from even the approach of sympathy. He had never spoken since the day he fell. Mary heard the doctor, one day when he was alone with him, adjuring him to speak.

"You can talk as well as I can," said the doctor. "You're worrying your wife like the devil. Why don't you speak to her?"

But Neale did not answer him, and Mary felt a hotter partisanship, a revolt against even persuading him. It was a tyranny, she thought, this entreating him to a more civil attitude in his weakness than he would have taken in his strength. She left his room this morning at the moment when some one was tapping at the front door, and she found Grissie waiting to be let in, though, according to the neighborhood custom, she might have entered and made herself known.

"Why, Grissie," said Mary Neale, "come right in."

Grissie was in the plainest yet prettiest of spring suits, a light green that glorified her hair and made a lovely flower of her: the bloom of her face above and dull calyx below. Mary concluded, in that first instant, that the city had improved her. The bright hair, once so bushy, was plainly done, so far as its willful strength would allow — you really could get a comb through it nowadays — and after the latest mode. Mary did not know how authoritative a mode it was, but she saw it was becoming to Grissie. She was exquisitely gloved, and her shoes were perfection. There was even a softening sobriety in her face. Not such had been the fly-away

Grissie who had gone shrieking to school, her skirt and waist parting company.

"Come in," said Mary again, smiling at her. She was glad to see the hoyden so reformed. "You just in on the train?"

Grissie stepped in with a pretty air, and, following Mary's inviting hand, turned toward the sitting-room. There she seated herself, as Mary did, and asked, with a becoming grave concern:

"How's Mr. Neale?"

"We think he's about the same," said Mary, listening for a stir from the room across the hall. She had to answer that question many times a day. "And how are you, Grissie?"

"I don't hardly know," said Grissie, in a homely fashion of speech. She had fixed her eyes on Mary, not boldly but with a serious candor that begged credulity. "I'm so worried. Mrs. Neale, has Ben told you he and I are engaged?"

"Ben?" said Mary, in irrepressible revolt, "engaged? To you?" Then she was sorry for her implied despite and added, with a natural indirectness: "Ben's nothing but a boy."

"He's old enough to be engaged," said Grissie. "He told me so."

Mrs. Neale sat staring at her in distaste now for the entire outfit, the green suit and the girl inside it. And she had immediately a strong sense that this was true. It was the logical result of her own heedlessness. She had allowed Ben an unrestricted intimacy with the girl, in her own dense way of regarding the Gleasons as nobody you could marry. But looking at Grissie now, she saw you could be engaged to them. You could even marry them.

"What makes you come to me?" she asked, with an involuntary coldness.

"He won't answer my letters," said Grissie. "I'm terribly worried."

"I'll call him in," said Mary.

She went across the hall and listened at the door of her husband's room. Then she pulled the door slightly to, and came back past Grissie to the kitchen. Grissie cast a quick glance at her, and until she could again pluck up her sense of what she meant to do, she was almost afraid of this towering matron with such a gleam in her blue eyes and lips so set. She heard Mary calling imperiously: "Ben! Ben!" and in a moment Mary was back again. But she did not take her chair. She stood by the hearth, looking over Grissie, who still sat, expectantly at the door. In a moment Ben appeared, hat off, hair tossed about and a flush in his cheeks. He had been wrestling with Trueman in the barn. He was always trying, in an intermittent way, to get up his muscle, and Trueman, who had no other supremacy over the Academy boy, loved to throw him. He stopped at sight of Grissie and looked blankly at her. That he was aghast, his mother saw.

"Now, Ben," said she, and her look was no more imperious than her tone, "Grissie's got something to say to you."

A slight movement flickered over Grissie's face. It was the hint of a smile, a signal to him that she meant him well and if he would play fair he had nothing to fear from her.

"I told your mother," said she, with an indefinable implication that he might read more in her words than their definite outer meaning, "you wouldn't answer my letters."

"O come, Grissie," said Ben, beginning to throw off his apprehension.

But Mary stopped him. It was more than answering letters.

"Tell the whole, Grissie. Don't you want to? Then I will. She says you have asked her to marry you."

Ben stood in the doorway, his hand on the casing, and his flushed face grew redder, his brows darkened. He did not speak and Mary's heart grew chill.

"Come, Ben," said she, but not imperiously now. She seemed to be imploring him, and he knew what she desired. He was to tell her he hadn't made love to Grissie Gleason, and tell her truthfully. Nothing short of that. "You are not fit to marry," said his mother. "You haven't any sense of responsibility. But I can understand your being silly about it. Have you been talking to Grissie?"

Ben had always been afraid of his mother. He hoodwinked her, but only by showing an innocent and boyish front. Now he looked guilty from his fear, but he spoke impetuously.

"No," said he.

Mary drew a quick breath. Her face softened into fair surfaces, and she looked sweetly at him as if she blessed him for his innocence. She hardly, in her relief, had a thought for Grissie. But she did turn to her. "There!" she said, "you see. You've misunderstood him somehow."

Grissie rose from her chair and faced him.

"Will you tell her," she said, "you didn't see me when you were in Boston and you didn't promise to come back?"

Ben looked at his mother.

"I s'pose I did say I'd come back," he owned. "But what's that? Everybody says those things."

There came a snatch of song from the kitchen: Ellen at her work. Now she opened the door. She was coming in to put away china, and went back for her tray. Ben knew Grissie's habit of mind. She would not pause for Ellen.

"Grissie," said he, in the desperate clutch at even a futility to make her pause, "I haven't told mother,— but I am engaged — to Ellen. We're going to be married before long."

Ellen, the great tray in both hands, her sleeves rolled high, came across the hall and stopped.

"Why, Grissie," said she, "you here?"

Then something in the air spoke to her, something strange. She turned irresolutely, with her tray, and was retreating. But Grissie called her:

"Ellen, come here. Mrs. Neale, can't she come back?"

"Yes, Ellen," said Mary gently. "Come in." She stepped forward and took the tray and set it on the table. "Now, Ellen," she said, "Ben has told us something. I shouldn't have called you in here, but you're here and I'd like you to speak." Ellen stood looking at her, startled yet not alarmed. "Ben says," his mother went on, "you and he are engaged to be married."

Ellen turned a look on Ben, an indignant look, a proud one, it seemed to Grissie. Ben met it with her name, beseechingly: "Ellen!" But Grissie did not wait.

"I came here," she said, with conviction and a certain dignity, "to find out why Ben won't answer my letters. I've told his mother the truth. He's engaged to me. But I didn't mean to tell all the truth. Mrs. Neale, you want me to?"

"Yes," said Mary. "I think you better."

"Ben Neale came to Boston to see me," said Grissie, speaking fast, yet concisely, as if she had prepared her evidence and kept it at her tongue's end. "He came to see me at my boarding-house, and we went to the theater. And the next day we went on a trip. And we stayed at a hotel. And I can tell you the name we took, and you can send and see if it isn't so."

To Ben, his mother had never looked so terrible. He hardly saw Ellen, a still figure by the door with what lightning on her brow he did not guess until he rehearsed the scene in memory.

"Ben," said his mother, "I ask you for form's sake. But I know what the answer ought to be. Is this true?"

Ben did not hesitate.

"Mother," said he, in a haste that looked all impulse, "when a girl says anything, you can't —"

"Yes," said his mother, "you can tell a girl she lies, if she does lie. Has she told the truth?"

"No," said Ben. In the violence of his desperation, he said it loudly. Ellen took a step toward him and slipped her hand in his, hanging at his side. His fingers closed on it.

"Ellen," said Mary Neale, "have you told Ben you would marry him?"

"No," said Ellen. "He asked me. But I'll tell him now. I will, Ben. I will."

All her adoration for Mary Neale, brought to shame by her son, all her old sex scorn of Grissie, all the religion of chastity that had made her condemn Grissie to an outer darkness of moral life, had armed her for championship.

"There!" said Mary Neale. "Grissie, you hear. Ellen, run away. You go with her, Ben. I want to speak to Grissie."

Ellen turned about, still holding Ben's hand, and seemed

to be leading him in a triumphal progress, not retreat. Grissie gazed after them, open-mouthed. In her amazement, she allowed herself a perfectly spontaneous comment:

"Well, that beats me. Ellen Brock!"

"Sit down, Grissie," said Mary Neale, and Grissie was glad to sit. She was not a psychologist except in charming her own like, and the turn of circumstance had weakened her knees.

Mary drew up a chair to her and took her hands. It was an amazing warmth from her, but Mary at that instant was profoundly thankful. Her boy was saved from what reality of pollution she could not let herself think. Here was the wanton little creature who had tried to besmirch him, and she passionately desired to make her clean. Yet what, her mind asked her, could you expect of a Gleason? The Gleasons of to-day were not the Gleasons of the past, who had been professors and preachers, and then, by force of their own intellectual impetus, had run out and married foolishly, and perpetuated the least valuable of their traits.

"Grissie," she began, "you'd break your mother's heart if she knew you could say a thing like that, and say it right out so." And yet Mary, even at the moment, believed no Gleason heart would be broken by the irregular facts of life. The Gleasons were not bad, but they lived on the edge of things amid naïve simplicities.

Grissie did not speak. She sat looking at Mary Neale, her soft skin, that wonderful complexion Grissie had heard about ever since she was a little girl, and the kind eyes, kinder now, Grissie shrewdly knew, because Mary had got back her son unspoiled.

"You'd break my heart," said Mary, "if you were my daughter. It isn't — modest — Grissie, to talk about

such things. Or to think of them too much. Wait, and they'll come to you in good time, and you'll be married. And when you have children of your own, you'll see what it is to want them to be modest and — good." And then she leaned forward and kissed her. Grissie sat for a moment looking at her in terror of her goodness, her innocence, as the little light heart saw it, the incredible lovingness that let her lay aside her dignity and give the kiss that meant, she knew, not casual affection but admonition, forgiveness. Grissie had still a great deal to say, but she could not enter upon it in the face of Mary Neale's maternal charm. She felt like crying now, like asking her: "Would you rather have things as you think they are or as they are?" But all she could do was to release herself from Mary's hands and get out of her chair and stand there dazed and at a loss. Should she go home, her errand so miserably accomplished? Mary, too, got up.

"You said you'd just come from the train?" she asked.

"Yes," said Grissie.

"And I suppose you're going to make your mother a little visit?"

"Yes," said Grissie. "Maybe I shall stay round here quite a while." And yet she knew she should not. The flawless texture of the new green suit could never be exposed to a knock-about intercourse with young Gleasons. But Grissie was picking up a little, in spite of her awe over Mary Neale's sweet motherliness. She may have been, in those words, warning Mary that her accusation had not been slain by a simple No from Ben. She took a few steps toward the door and came back. She had it in mind to say to Mary, "It was all true." But she could not. Mary's radiant content enveloped her, and Grissie got out of the house as fast as she could. And

as she went along the road, as gay a picture of spring as you could wish, she saw Ben waiting for her. And then, whether from art or hurt feeling, she began to cry, and Ben, who had never seen tears on her blooming cheek, was appalled.

"Don't!" he besought her. "For God's sake, Grissie, what d'you go to mother for? Why didn't you come to me?"

"I did write to you and you wouldn't answer," said Grissie. She was carefully sopping her tears lest they splash the green loveliness below.

Ben was entirely subjugated by the tears. He was irritated with her beyond words for bringing their game into the radius of these solemn things where one had to be engaged or not engaged. All his past with her had been a romp, he thought, where she had beckoned and he had followed — but only because she beckoned. He did not want what the beckoning promised. Only, this was youth, and strange penalty had overtaken him. It gave him a sickness of mind and body.

"Go back, Grissie," he urged her. "Don't go home. Go right back to town and I'll write to you."

"Will you harness up and take me to Beckenham?" asked Grissie.

"God! no, I can't. You know I can't."

"Then I sha'n't go back," said she. "But you know, Ben, you'll have to marry me."

She walked on and left him standing there and he took a step after her and then turned about and went home, pale with his own thought, and on into the barn where Trueman had come for a rake and asked him if he wanted another "wrastle." Ben looked at him as if he did not hear, and went to the ladder and climbed the mow.

"Father worse?" Trueman called after him.

"No," said Ben, and Trueman went out of the barn muttering that there were no nests up there anyway. Ben could not have told why he wanted to take refuge in that dusty corner where he and Hugh had played. He threw himself down there and thought desperately he'd like to smoke and set the barn afire and die in the ruins — at least run away while it was burning and let them think he'd died. He felt unspeakably disgusted and tired and at odds with life as it catches you by the heels and throws you when all you have done is to act as it smilingly bade you. He lay there a long time, hating everything: not Grissie; he hardly thought of her at all, except as somebody who had done an incredibly maddening and foolish thing. His mother called him, first from the house and then nearer and nearer as she crossed the yard. He heard her below him, and hardly breathed or stirred, lest she catch the rustling of the hay. She went through the rear barn door and called again. And then she returned and, seeming to give it up, walked back across the yard. He put his hands before his face and cried a tear or two, in his anger and dismay. And the thought of Ellen came to him, of her clear voice when she said, "I will, Ben, I will," and of the feel of her firm, small hand, warm from its dishwashing, as she slipped it into his. All the sweetness and safety of the world seemed to be in the compass of that hand, and he lay and devised how he should not lose her.

Mary, returned to the house, went at once to Ellen, and strangely Ellen could not bear to meet her eyes. What had she done, her faint heart asked her? promised herself to Ben who was only her playmate? But Mary took her hand and held it hard. She spoke, and her voice

was so full of passion that it gripped Ellen's imagination and made her breathless to think this splendor of a woman could let her heart be seen.

"You'll save him, Ellen," said Mary. "A woman can save a man. I've always believed that. He never seems to care about anything — but if he cares about you! And think what a girl like that could do with him! but she's not done it yet, and you will save him."

Ellen answered her look with one that was a desperate promise. She was under that purest, most complete domination, the love of a girl for an older woman, twisted of strands of an almost invincible strength, because they are the filaments of life itself. There was filial worship and obedience, the stronger because her own picture of motherhood was irreparably defaced; there was the yearning and prescience of what she herself wanted to become. This then, she knew, was what she was to do for Mary Neale. She was to save her son for her. But she hardly spoke to Ben for days, or looked at him, and he was too alert and clever to seem to look at her. There was a deference in his air, a waiting on her pleasure; she felt it, and was half troubled, half appeased.

XXIX

Now Ben entered upon a period of dismay. For Grissie did go back, and there were letters from her. They came to the office, and he always knew what they were going to say, and sometimes would not read them for days, sometimes not at all. But they did worry him and pursued him perhaps more harassingly than if he had dealt with them at once and put them out of sight. He grew hollow-eyed and was irritable, and one Sunday he asked Ellen to walk with him to Hemlock Ridge. At first she said no, for she was still unfamiliar to herself, after her promise to him; but his mother looked strangely at her — as if there were questions she must ask of two so at odds — and she took back her answer. When they crossed the orchard to the lane, she tried not to look at the little house. It seemed to her, if she didn't see how still and lonesome it was, she could fancy all the Brocks were there as they had been in her dream. They went down the lane without talking and into the shade of the woods. Then Ben broke his miserable reticence and stopped and turned to her.

"Ellen," said he, "if you don't marry me straight off, I shall blow my brains out. I've stood all I can."

It was vaguely distasteful to her, the manner of it, the words, but she agreed in herself that he did look as if he'd borne all he could.

"I've got to tell you," said Ben. "She writes to me. She says things that would kill my mother. Sometime she'll say 'em out loud."

"Do you write to her?" asked Ellen coldly.

"Once or twice I did. I've told her — never mind. But Ellen, you're living with us, mother and me. It wouldn't be any different. Just marry me and the letters'll stop. If you can't do it for me, I should think you could for mother. She's had enough to bear."

Ellen stood looking up the slope into the dark layers of shade under the hemlock trees. The woods seemed to pulsate before her. Woods often do that before tired or excited eyes. It may be their breathing, and when you catch the pulsation you are the more bewildered, and if you have lost your way, go round in a circle to that astounding rhythm. Ellen felt as if she were going round. The space beyond her little world was like a circle of darkness, outside the light of her small candle of experience. Now it did not even beckon her. She still, when she saw Larry, longed passionately to be "over there" and work for the war; but "over there" was, after all, only a place on a map. And she had not known the taste of love,— nothing of love, since her father died, save that jealous anger over her mother: the little bud of passion was still frozen in her heart. She did think suddenly, and with a wild longing, of the stranger of her dreams. He had not come lately. There was a time when it had seemed he really might appear in the flesh and lighten her darknesses; but there was nobody actually to lighten them but Mary Neale, in her warm beneficence. And thinking of her, the mists cleared away and the pulsating trees were still, and she turned to Ben with a look of clarity and sweetness that only Mary Neale had yet brought to her.

"Why, yes, Ben," said she. "I will, if you want me to."

The blood ran into his face and something flashed up

in his eyes so that she shrank from him. If he could look like that, he was man enough to conquer his own hardships without asking a girl to help him. But he was suppliant, too, and when he put out his hands to her she knew he was really nothing but her playmate.

"No," said she, though she was trembling. "You said we'd be just the same."

Ben stood an instant looking at her, the brightness still in his eyes. It faded suddenly.

"Yes," he said. "It'll be just the same. Come on up the ridge and see if the cardinals have winter-killed."

And they did go up the ridge, and it was as it used to be when they went to study, and Ellen felt the relief of touching certainties, knowing what was expected of her and what she meant to do. And she knew it was going to be just the same. But when, in the latter part of the afternoon they went down the ridge, they met Larry. He had on his Sunday freshness of blue clothes, and he had been, he told Ellen, to call on her.

"Then come back up the ridge," she said. She flushed and trembled at the happy sight of him. "Ben'll go home."

"Yes," said Larry. "Ben, you go on home."

Ben was not quite pleased, but they smiled him away and he went off whistling. And Larry and Ellen turned back to the seat under the tree. She told him at once. Perhaps she was not unwilling to surprise a Larry who had said he loved her and did not want her.

"I'm going to marry Ben."

Larry looked at her for a moment of perfectly apparent horror.

"No!" he cried. "You're not. You sha'n't."

He called it so fiercely that Ben, half-way down the slope, thought the cry was to him and answered, and they

were silent a minute or two, listening, for fear he would return. Ellen laughed. She liked to know Larry was pulling her back. It gave a sense of security, as it used to when father let her slide down the low mow while he leaned over from behind and held her petticoats.

"Ellen," said Larry, "have you the faintest conception of what it is to be in love?"

"Yes," said Ellen boldly, enjoying herself, with the deterrent force on her petticoats.

"Very good. But I don't believe it. Now if you're in love with Ben, do you think of him all day and dream of him all night?"

"No," said Ellen. She remembered the stranger and blushed.

"Do you long for him when he isn't there and when he is have little tempers and waywardnesses, because, however much he loves you, it isn't enough?"

"I like to be with Ben," said she sedately.

"You are," said Larry, "the most ignorant girl in the world about the one thing that concerns men and women most. You haven't batted round among boys and girls of your own age and got the bloom taken off your dear little feelings. And nobody's told you what life is or what marrying is. Damn it all! why doesn't Mary Neale tell you? She's had a hard row of it. Or is she too anxious to have you marry her son?"

"Ben isn't like his father," said Ellen. "Ben's lovely every day. And he's fun. We laugh all the time."

"You won't laugh all the time, if you marry him," said Larry. "You'll wonder what you clipped your wings for. They'll be clipped, Ellen. If you don't like it, you can't walk out of the house as you walked out of your mother's, to go to Mary Neale's."

"Oh, I should," said Ellen calmly.

He looked at her with a despairing love that saw what it desired a thousand times enhanced by every day of coming womanhood and yet isolated through its own willfulness. Ellen did not mean to be willful. That was the strange charm of her. She did not know the steps of the road she had chosen, and its blossomy shade looked sweet.

"See here," said Larry. "I'll make a bargain. Give him up and take me, and I'll swear to drop off by the time you want your wings."

"Oh, but you didn't want me to clip my wings."

"You wouldn't," said Larry sadly. "You'd be safe for a while anyway. And now you're walking into the lion's jaws."

"Ben!" said she, and laughed. And indeed Ben was no lion, and Larry found he had weakened his plea by over-coloring.

He had his last defense to make.

"Nell," said he, "why do you suppose I told you to take home the flag?"

She looked at him reproachfully, blushing for him. She could not say to him: "Because you'd made up your mind never to need it any more."

"Why did I love you and let you go?" asked Larry. "You'll say I couldn't have kept you. But that's neither here nor there. What's called us out and stood us up in the open to be shot if we don't live up to the things we've seen 'over there'? It's the war, Nell. We've found we've got souls, and we can't go back on 'em. And so I say to you, remember you're a woman now and you can't marry a man unless you adore him every way as a woman like you should. You're not to play a little foolish game with Ben. You're made to be the mother of heroes."

Ellen looked him in the eyes, in unwilling yielding, in a

momentary worship. They were both trembling and saw each other strangely for an instant when, he knew, she was his in acquiescence and a wild desire for the high things he demanded of her. Then she rose and he followed her, and they walked down the slope and parted without a word.

Ben was waiting for her and asked eagerly what Larry said; but she answered vaguely and went on to her own room.

But Larry hurried home and got his kit and whistled Smilie and they went over to Sally Wheeler's for the night. She was sitting in the arbor in her great prodigal garden where everything lived fatly, and in riot. There never was such a gardener as Sally Wheeler, for floral food and drink. She had piles of papers before her on the table, and her eyes were tired. The papers she swept into the big basket they had come out in, and told Larry he had saved her reason. She'd been going over accounts, the hospital accounts and the Relief Fund and finding her bank balance all but invisible.

"I shall have to sell something," said Sally indifferently. She rang the huge bell that stood at her side and Ann appeared and was told to bring tea. Larry thought, as he often did, when he saw them together, that the maid was the amazing replica of the mistress, and wondered how Sally Wheeler had managed, and really without knowing it, to stamp her personality on her household. He told at once what he had come for. Ellen was going to be married and he had got to be comforted.

"What do you take it so hard for?" asked Sally. She had begun to knit on a coarse gray stocking, and she looked up sharply at him, over her work. "You can't have her."

"No," said Larry. "But she's only a child. I don't want anybody to have her till she grows up."

"I meant to have her myself," said Sally. "She's a wonderful worker. I meant to send her over to France."

"She's had no training," said Larry.

"Yes, she has, my First Aid. I'd got a plan to smuggle her through as secretary to a woman I know. Then when she got over there she'd be put to work. However, I suppose she'd rather marry a handsome young man. I'll ask her though."

Larry thought it might be a good thing to ask her. He knew how he could set her heart beating by his talk of "over there." But no one told him how that very week Ben got a letter from Grissie saying she was coming home for good, and how he besought Ellen to say she'd marry him and, he told her, laughing, "have it over." He did not give her the reason in his mind, nor did he tell his mother; but he begged Mary to help him, and she, when Ellen turned to her, half bewildered and really half adventurous, did let her see how pleasant a way she thought it for them all. Perhaps Ellen would have done anything hard and heroically beautiful in those days for Mary Neale, who was half goddess to her and half bewildering woman. And so, if it was a sacrifice, she made ready for it, and gave her word, and was even willing, so strangely unimportant did it seem, to do it without telling poor Ardelia. But this Mary would not have; and one night when she had seen Peleg drive by alone, leading a horse, and judged he had gone on some dickering that would take time, she harnessed the colt, because no man was by, and told Ellen they were going to drive to Bromley Wells to see her mother. It was a strange trip there and back in the scented night, a confused hurried moment with

Ardelia whom they found, in a bright blue dress, her hands folded from labor, in her parlor listening to a phonograph. She was enraptured at their coming and unreconciled to their having only a minute to stay; and when Mary Neale, in as few words as she could manage it, unwillingly, but knowing Ellen wouldn't undertake it at all, told her the news, she could only keep saying: "When? When's it goin' to be?" And then: "O darlin', I'll make you some clo'es." They left her at once, because Mary had to be home to release Hannah, who was sitting with Neale, and Ellen did, in a sudden burst of love for her mother, hug her generously, and Ardelia went back, in a pleasurable maze, to her phonograph.

All the way home Ellen wondered if she was not herself happy, after all, and if that did not mean she was in love. The night was enchantment to her, a bewildering consonance of heaven and earth, and in her the responding throb and yearning which is youth. In her heart she knew she was willing her marriage should be soon, partly because it was adventurous and life seemed to command her to meet it,— for this was her translating of Larry's call to courage — and partly because it would be a most unhappy thing to delay it while Ardelia made clothes and Peleg maybe bought a present. She resolved privately that she and Ben would drive to Beckenham and be married there. He came down the path to meet them, and she met his glance with such a misty one, not unwilling, yet shy in its loveliness, that he felt the call of her beauty bewilderingly, and with hope. The glance looked like surrender. But when he came in from unharnessing, she had gone up to bed.

Mary Neale, in her husband's room, was instantly aware that he was curious, that he had perhaps heard

the horse driven out of the yard, that he would not ask Hannah where she had gone, that he had speculated over her return. She did the last little things for the night and then went upstairs to undress and came back to lie down in her wrapper on the wide couch that served her for a bed. But she could not sleep and knew he, too, was awake, staring into the darkness and cut off by his insensate resolve from the articulate love she longed to share with him. It seemed to her an intolerable fate: to be bound by his physical overthrow and doubly fettered in the darkness of his mind. As the night went on she knew he was still awake, and suddenly she rose and went over to him and knelt there. Her hand found his, but she did not dare grasp it. She only gave it a swift little touch and away, lest she should trouble him.

"Thomas," she said, "it breaks my heart not to have you know things, but I can't always tell you for fear they'll hurt your feelings. Trueman told you about Ardelia's being married, but not how I took Ellen here to help out. And, Thomas, that child came to me of her own will and said her mother'd made over the place to her and if you wanted it you could have it. Now wasn't that a nice thing for her to do? I told her she'd better wait and think it over. And now she and Ben are talking of getting married, and so 'twould be all in the family anyway. Won't you try to like her when she's married Ben? We can't refuse a welcome to a good girl like that."

Still he did not answer, and his quiet was so tremendous — more terrible far than any action — that it seemed as if the room itself were listening. Again the weight of her separation from him came crushingly upon Mary, and she bent her face to the bed and cried. She was suffering the last pang of despised love. How would she have

gathered him to her, in all the fostering of her arms and heart, and he would not. She cried softly, since no one in the still house must hear her, and because, too, she must not trouble him. But she felt deluged in her own tears, the shame of them, and hardly knew how to get away from that undesired flood, back to her own bed. And suddenly she felt a touch. The fumbling hand had fallen on her hair.

"Don't cry," he said.

Instantly she ceased. She could do anything upon the miracle of his speaking to her.

"No," she said, "I won't cry."

And when the hand slipped from her head she bent her lips to it. And then she stole away to her couch and lay there in a rapture of imagined spiritual union with him, since at last he had been kind. And she could sleep now, in an exquisite languor because the world had come right.

But in the morning he was the same, and though she came to him with a child's expectancy, he did not speak. Perhaps her very eagerness had chilled him. He was of the men who suspiciously refrain from encouraging happiness too far.

XXX

Larry, wandering through the night stillnesses, thinking about Ellen and the evil ravaging the earth, seemed to himself to be living really in the world where the old New Englanders lived and thought of freedom and, when freedom was accomplished, clasped it to their breasts with arms made strong by carrying the gun. Whether he was in Bromley or the Bromley of an older time he did not know. Whatever happened in this present world, however he was sickened by temporizing and deliberate choice of the middle way that saw not righteousness but only safety, he seemed to himself to be snatching holiness out of the past. Sometimes he imagined himself invoking the counsel of men he knew through study of the old records — men who were of single if narrow purpose and who scorned expediency. There was a hermit of local fame who had lived over a hundred years ago, near the house where Larry lived now, and who had taken to the road, preaching revolt from tyranny. "Justice!" he had cried from door to door, until even the men who agreed with him and also were eager to fight for freedom on the sea laughed at him and his catchword, and he was called "Justice" until his death. There was a Brock, a faraway ancestor of Ellen, who had been at Valley Forge, a thoughtful man of wistful longings for beauty in a life where no beauty was save that of the spring and the frost and the ripening harvest, and who left some fragmentary verse — of no enduring quality, but aspiring to that land where all

beauty is: the unknown, the imperishable, the faerie home of fancy. Tradition had taught Larry much about the inner hearts of these citizens, and he had solace in them. And always, though they were plain men of humble degree, their pride of race was tremendous: because they were of the breed of patriots. Love of country wiped out in them all lesser loves, all pangs, all fears. They were responsive to great leaders because they had chosen their leaders for the greatness that was in them. They had not declined upon men who would counsel them to hide.

Chiefly the ghost that accompanied him these nights was Lawrence Greene, the gay, rich young patriot whom, in the lines of the face, he so resembled. Larry never cared much about going back from Lawrence to the founder of them all. He was willing to vault from Lawrence over the heads of the others to English soil, and rejoice that he was at one with that "decent and dauntless people." He had had his times of revolt against English insularity, but it was only the anger against our own beloved when we feel just shame for them. Now that the evil threatened them, he was aflame with a holy love, the love of altars and fires, of great reverences, of the blood that makes us one. But when he went through the countryside calling on men to remember their ancient lineage, they looked at him bemused, and reminded him that the administration had told them not to think. It would be disconcerting to remember all Larry said, in those days, of dictation from high places. It was picturesque — and unprintable. But whatever the war was doing for America, however it was rousing the heirs of the old holy heritage, however it was seeking out the base in lesser men, bidding them remember the preciousness of their own skins and the exceeding glory of platitudes, for Larry himself it was the bath of youth. He had been living on

that middle level where men realize that the first glowing prizes are past and that they have not, after all, the reach to attain the compensations of age. He saw, like all the specially endowed, always a vague something before his eyes, before his mind, forever elusive but still beckoning. He had done cold black and white studies of New England men and women; the spirit of things he could not summon. But now he began to see the vision of life more clearly, to hear her actual voice. He saw — and the war had made him see — how men are linked together, not in the sentimental brotherhood that riots in strikes and class hatreds and won't stand gigantic sacrificial tests, but linked by the winds, by the sun, by the stars, by the fiat of what we call God.

He could never get over the wonder of it. Here was the great evil still eating its way through Europe and the forces of life withstanding it, here was New England — for he didn't go so far at all times to say here was America — his heart would have broken if he had — here was New England benumbed by base advices, buying and selling as usual, not consciously agitated by the tempest that rocked the earth; and yet New England herself was so tightly bound to the brotherhood of all men that she was being affected by the whole great magnificent horrible business as much as they. She was earning her reward: either a chance to respond to the inner call or a place with the eternally disgraced who have said, "Let us alone. These things are not for us." He knew quite well what hot warfare was going on over the war in cities and among his own intellectual kind; he remembered how men and women were working and giving. These were the clear-sighted and therefore the faithful. But he wanted his own people, the people of Bromley, to take hands with the dead patriots who had willed righteous things, and

give him back his town as he saw it in the past. He could not bear to see the generous, wholesome impulses of life on which the social fabric is reared, lulled to sleep by the drug called pacifism. But all this, anguish as it was in the living, lifted him to the stars. When he thought of the multitudes going the way of death, it rounded death into a definable incident. There grew to be a homely brightness about what we call eternal life. These things bore him up until, in the exaltation of them, he could almost believe there was such balance in the universe, such rhythmic compensation, such inevitable result that it even helped him meet the sharp distress that had assaulted him one morning in an idle breath of news. Mrs. Gleason had brought it, and he had hardly seemed to listen; but now he sat numb in his silent house and tried to recall the things he had thought before the news came to him. Then he heard a step on the path, and looked out and there, incredibly, was Hugh. At first he did not know him. The country lad walked with a stride and swing. He was brown from the sea; his face was a man's face, the soft beauty of it hardened, and he carried himself like a soldier. Larry strode to the door, falling over Smilie and swearing at her, and after all Smilie was first and leaped on Hugh, clawing at him in a frantic welcome. And Larry's first words were:

"Hurt your arm?"

Hugh had turned a little to fend him off and given his left hand.

"It's all right," he said. "But I can't use it yet. That's why I'm here."

"How'd you do it?" Larry asked, in a heat of eagerness over him, and getting him in, though Smilie made it difficult.

He didn't care how it was done, so that Hugh was

there, but something had to be said and the warmest things couldn't be. Larry was of New England, and he didn't know how to speak his feelings. Hugh sat down in his old place and sat straight. No more lounging for him.

"It was a fool thing to do," he said. "I had all kinds of escapes, and then a motor truck ran wild and pitched me 'out. Larry!"

He had fixed Larry with hot, wretched eyes.

"Yes," said Larry. He knew what was coming.

"You wrote me Ben's going to marry Ellen."

"Yes."

"What does it mean? For God's sake, what's it mean?"

"I don't know," said Larry.

"Is she in love with him?"

"Not"— he was about to add —"not what I should call love," but he amended it, seeing the dark trouble of Hugh's face, and said, "Not what you and I'd call love. Have you been home?" he asked.

"No." Hugh seemed to be brooding.

"Not to see your mother?"

"I had to find out about this first. I didn't know what I could do if I came on it suddenly — came in on them together. Mother wrote me Ellen's staying there."

"Yes. Is this what you came back for?"

"Yes. I was no good over there, with this arm — for the present."

"You mean you're going back?"

Hugh looked at him in a brief surprise. Nothing but his own inner turmoil seemed actually to interest him.

"Of course I'm going back," he said. "What else is there to do? I came steerage. I'm going the same way. But I've got to know about Ellen. I've got to know."

"Hugh!" said Larry, and then stopped.

He didn't know how to tell him. There were hosts of eager, compassionate impulses in him, rushing to be heard, to tell him love, even love, was to be forgotten in the tumult of this day. Or it was to be gloriously remembered and welded into the despair that makes the heart stout and the arm strong.

"Hugh," said he again, "you'll have to face it. It's pretty bad."

Hugh still looked at him and actually seemed not to breathe, he was so still.

"Well," said he, at last, "you'd better tell me." But Larry sat staring at him miserably. "They're married then," said Hugh. Larry nodded. "When?"

"Yesterday."

"Yesterday!" Hugh seemed to be repeating it in wonder only. "If it had been to-day I could have done it."

"Done what?"

"Stopped it. Gone to her. Told her she'd got to come with me."

"But, Hugh," said Larry, "she's done it of her own free will."

"Her own free will? What's her will, poor child? She's been taken in somehow. You don't suppose she wanted Ben? You don't for a minute suppose that?"

"Ben's a very handsome fellow," said Larry weakly.

"Handsome! Ellen marrying a fellow because he's handsome! You don't know Ellen." Larry thought he did know her. He had one of the ironical moments of the old when they want to tell you they understand what they have lost far better than the young who inherit it. "Ellen Brock is a kind of girl — a kind of woman — like my mother," said Hugh. His words choked him, and

he shook himself impatiently at the weakness of them. "She'll wake up sometime and realize what she's done. Did they go away?"

"No. They're at your house. Ben wanted to go away, but she wouldn't."

"Well," said Hugh. He rose, and stood a moment, immovable, looking out of the window at the waving green. "I'll go over there."

"Your mother —" said Larry, and then stopped. He wanted to say Hugh's mother would be glad to see him, and so get her gracious image into the boy's mind, effacing the confusion of its trouble.

"Oh, yes," said Hugh, absently, "I shall see mother. Of course."

He walked out of the door, and Smilie, after curving about him down the path, returned in great excitement to ask Larry if this wasn't a wonderful day and if they mightn't go with him. But Larry pulled her ears absently and didn't answer. He thought it was grief he had for Hugh. But he had seen into the lad's soul, and what he found there woke in him something besides grief. It was fear.

Hugh marched fast across the woods, and when he came to the spot where the path turned to the violet bank, he remembered, but only for an instant's clutch of his hands upon themselves. It was too slight a misery to weigh in the scale of his present loss. When he went up the lane, he gave one glance at the little house, fearing to find it closed and so a hurt the more to Ellen, as to his own old sense of childish values. But the blinds were open and the vines waving. The beauty of spring was there. He went along the road to his father's house, his eyes scanning every aspect of the scene. And across the road he saw Ben, in shirt and trousers, planting corn.

Ben was working, not after his custom now that his father's eyes were no longer urging him, slowly, and with a lazy ease, but furiously. Hugh leaped the wall and went to him, walking, though he was climbing the rise, faster and faster, until when Ben saw him, he had begun to run. Ben stood for a moment incredulous, and then threw down his hoe. He gave a shout and ran forward. He was shocked into gladness and then, at the same instant, cooled to apprehension. But from that he recovered at once. If he had muddled away Hugh's money, it was, after all, Aunt Tab's, and Hugh had no exclusive business with it. And if Ellen had been the loser, everything that concerned Ellen touched him only now, for she was his. Ben had time to see how Hugh had changed, how much the man he was, how charged with fiery strength. But he was not prepared for the storm in his face, the curt, determined voice:

"I want to know it all before I see her."

"Mother?"

"Ellen. How did you get her? What has she done it for? Quick!"

Ben swaggered a little, not that he underrated the seriousness of the minute, but because he had to choose a defensive attitude.

"Oh, come," he said. "What's any girl marry for?" Then he saw some one nearing, and the sight tied his tongue and blanched his face. Hugh, his back to the road, noted the change in him and despised him because he looked afraid. But Ben was not cowed by him. He was dismayed at Grissie, coming up the slope, not now in the green of spring but a soft hue that clarified her to a wistful beauty. Hugh heard her step and turned.

"I saw you," she said to him, "when you came across from Larry's. I've been sitting side of the road by your

house, to see if I could see Ben. But I s'pose you know he's married."

Hugh did not answer.

"Well," said Grissie, in a dull way, "he is. Ardelia was at the station, to get some goods for Peleg. She told me. She'd only heard herself by accident, but she couldn't think of anything except it was such a good match. Hugh, he ought to have married me."

She was so different from the Grissie he used to know that Hugh stood in silence staring at her. He could not, indeed, answer this extraordinary speech.

"He came to see me," she said, ignoring Ben, in a strange preoccupation, as if he actually were not there. "We had a good time. He had lots of money and we spent it, and we were as happy as the day is long." In her trouble she was going back to the phrase of Gleasons who had never been to the Academy.

"Money?" said Hugh, picking out the one significant word from her equable flow of talk, and turning with it to his brother.

"Yes," said Grissie, "a hundred dollar bill. And he had more. He bought me things. What am I going to do?"

Still she looked at Hugh only, as if Ben, who was the center of her grief, had no bodily existence at all; and she seemed piteous to him. For Grissie was, according to the standards of clean nature, good. She was as unthinking in her affections as the birds that nest and then forget their nesting; but within her was the unsuspected core of decency that could ache and suffer.

"Go home, Grissie," said Hugh, gently. "Don't talk to people. Go home."

"What am I to do?" she cried. "Hugh, you can't tell me to go home and not what I'm going to do."

"I don't know," said Hugh, "what any of us are going to do. But you must get away from here — now — and you mustn't talk."

"Oh, I sha'n't tell," said Grissie, bitterly. "I'll go home, and mother'll be so pleased she'll call the others in and they'll talk me blind. And to-night I'll take the train and go back. But he's got to see me first. Ben, you've got to see me."

She gave him a miserable glance, and turned and went down the hill. Hugh waited until she was out of ear-shot. Then he raised his eyes from the ground and bent them on his brother. Ben had the ravaged look that follows fear. He might not be afraid of Hugh, but he had a miserable dread of present circumstance, and his muscles sagged.

"What is it," said Hugh, "about money?"

Ben came erect and faced him.

"That's my business," said he.

"Was it the money I left for Ellen? You'd better answer. You'll have to."

"Take it then, if you want it," said Ben. "It was the money you left me — Aunt Tab's money."

"You took that money," said Hugh, in a perfect maze, "and spent it on —" He paused. "Did you give any of it to Ellen? Did you give her my message?"

"It was Aunt Tab's money," said Ben doggedly. "So it was as much mine as yours."

The last determining cause they never knew. Only masculine rage was at its height. Hugh sprang on him, and they were struggling. They had often wrestled in the old days, and each knew the other's faults of science. Hugh was the stronger, even with his defective arm, but Ben had a cleverer art. And Ben was straining fiercely and with a joy in his heart, unknown for months. He was tired of skulking away from the thought of Grissie

and of Aunt Tab's money. It was good to be fighting like a man. But Hugh was all a confused desperation of downing something that had betrayed him and robbed him of his love. It was across his numb consciousness that there came first the cry, "Boys! boys! What are you doing, boys?"

This was Mary Neale, running as she called. Grissie had stopped in the road and watched them and when they grappled she ran to the window where Mary sat for a moment alone, recalling, in a vague trouble, the look on Ben's face and on Ellen's when they had come down that morning. Now she ran to her sons and thrust her soft arms between them, still crying to them. In that moment, she did not say to herself that Hugh had come back and how strange it was; they might have been children playing every day under her eyes, now foolishly quarreling. But she thrust them apart, her voice, not her strength, and they stood frowning, red, two savages that longed to kill. Mary shuddered then and sickened. She thought of the old cry from the skies, "Where is thy brother?" She might have gone to the ground in her weakness, for the bright day grew dark before her; but Hugh put his arms about her. And then she knew he had come back, and stroked his cheeks and murmured to him.

"You've come home," she said, "from that dreadful place. And now you'll stay with mother."

"Not more than a week," said Hugh. "That's my leave."

She acquiesced instantly, all obedience to the man's will in his voice, and began to praise him for coming, and tell him how good he was.

"I came to keep him from marrying Ellen," said Hugh. "But it's done."

"Did you want Ellen?" asked Mary, still clinging to him and forgetting Ben, who stood with miserable eyes on them. "Oh, my darling, it's too late. And didn't she love you? How could she help loving you?"

"It's not too late," said Hugh, "until I've seen her." He loosed himself from his mother and started down the slope. But she followed, and clung to his arm, and Ben walked beside her. Grissie, below, watched them coming, and they seemed so tall up there on the hill and so awesome in their striding haste, that she fled along the road to her own home. Mary talked with a quick vehemence as they went down the hill:

"Don't say things to her, Hugh, dreadful things, you know. I'm very fond of Ellen. She has married Ben. Don't you realize that, Hugh? She has married Ben."

But Hugh did not answer, and when they got to the door he opened it and strode in, leaving his mother to come after him. Mary, as she slipped in behind him, went at once to the door of her husband's room and closed it softly. And as she turned, she saw Hugh standing just inside the sill of the other room, silent and Ellen facing him. Ben was behind his brother, and Mary did not know what passions or what repression moved their faces; but as she looked at Ellen she saw a strange thing. Ellen at first seemed aghast with wonder. Then the color came flooding over her face, and it bloomed into ecstasy. She began to smile, tremulously at first, and then she laughed a little. And the end was that she went forward a step, two paces — Hugh had not moved toward her — and he took her into his arms. She lifted her face to him, and he kissed it again and again.

"He's kissed you," said Hugh, in a hoarse, exultant voice. "But I can't help that. Whatever's done I can't help it. But, by God, he sha'n't again."

Ellen withdrew from him a little and laughed up into his eyes. Her own were the eyes of happiness; her voice was exquisite.

"But nobody's kissed me — like that," she said. "And nobody ever shall."

Hugh, now with an arm about her, remembered the others and threw a glance at them. It was a conqueror's glance, but it was desperate. He knew, though Ellen seemed joyously to forget, what walls towered between them. And then Ellen saw Ben and her brows were troubled and she spoke like a child:

"Ben, I'm sorry. But I didn't know. Not till last night. I told you then. Why, there's never been anybody but Hugh."

Ben stood looking at her. He felt the shame of the unjustly used; for Ellen, his angry mind told him, was as accountable for taking him as he was for entreating her. Vague phrases about the law's impartiality were floating through his mind. Mary went forward and put a gentle hand on Ellen's arm. It was time, she thought, to persuade her away from that grasp of Hugh's.

"Sit down, dear," she said. "Hugh's just come, you know. We've got a good many things to talk over."

"Oh, let me stay with him," said Ellen. "He's been gone so long." She laid her cheek on his shoulder an instant, and then smiled up in his face, and withdrew from him. "Sit down," she said. "Your mother's hardly seen you."

So they all sat down, and that seemed a strange, acquiescent thing to do. This was a battle. It had to be fought out. How could it be fought except on foot?

"Ellen!" said Ben sharply. He meant to lose no advantage and no more self-respect by being treated like the

prisoner at the bar. "Don't you remember you were married to me yesterday?"

Ellen turned to him in an impulsive warmth.

"Oh, yes," she said. "That's what makes it dreadful. Mrs. Neale, you mustn't blame Hugh. It was over before he came. I told Ben. It was when you brought me upstairs and kissed me and left me in that room. And when you had gone, I ran into my own room and locked the door, and when he spoke to me through the keyhole, I said, 'Never! never!'"

Now Mary Neale's heart was with her other son, who had been deceived and, though innocently, tricked.

"You said 'never'?" she repeated. "But you were married, Ellen. Why didn't you say it before?"

Ellen looked at her and it was impossible to believe she was not telling the truth.

"I don't know," she said. "Truly, I don't know. I thought about it a great deal, last night. I didn't sleep. And I thought perhaps girls often don't know, till it is over, just what they've done."

"I suppose," said Mary, in irrepressible bitterness, "if you'd married Hugh, you'd have said 'never,' and expected him to go away."

"Oh, no," said Ellen, the ecstatic flush again in her face. "Oh, no! not Hugh. I understand now. Love!"

She said the word broodingly, and really to herself, but, Hugh knew, as he looked at her, possessed by him, the image of him trembling for her in every atom of the world. But Mary, though loving him, was the more on fire for justice to her other son.

"You could have stayed awake and thought it out before," she said. "Nobody made you marry Ben. You did it of your own free will."

"Oh, but it was because Grissie was telling those dread-

ful things about him," said Ellen, "and they made you unhappy. She told lies about him, Hugh. And it was true, what he said to me. If he were married, she would stop persecuting him. And I like Ben. He hadn't been silly, as other boys are. Or rough, Hugh!" She laughed a little, and he knew she was remembering the violet bank and that she had forgiven him at last. "O Ben!" said she, "I'm sorry." Ben was silent, looking at her. His mind was a battlefield. There was the jealousy incident to another's triumph; but there was, too, the wish that he could walk out of the room without being a coward, and the certainty that he'd got to fight it out with Hugh or suffer the ignominy of being thrown. "I was sorry last night," said Ellen timidly. "I saw what I'd done. I was sorry till this morning, about an hour ago. And then I began to be happy. I know why, now. Hugh was coming." She turned to Hugh again, with that look of possessive eloquence.

"You see," said Hugh to his mother, and again Ben was enraged at his own small place in a drama that really concerned him somewhat.

"Now I'm going," said Ellen. She got up and looked at Mary Neale beseechingly. "You can't ever like me again, Mrs. Neale. I see that. I'm going home."

"To your mother?" asked Mary, confused because there was no clear right to champion.

"Why, no," said Ellen, surprised. "I couldn't go there." She did not mention Peleg, but the vision of him seemed suddenly to rise up in the room. "To the little house. That's my home."

Mary got up and followed her to the door. She was troubled over the foolishness of it, too, the silly inconveniences.

"Why, there's nothing over there to eat," she said.

"I don't want anything," said Ellen. She laughed suddenly and looked the more beautiful. "I'll go down to Larry's and ask him to let me eat with him."

Hugh had risen, and now he said to her:

"That's right. Go home, and I'll come to you. Mother'll come with me."

"I'll come, too," said Ben sardonically. "And I sha'n't need to take mother to call on my own wife."

So Ellen, without a look at any of them, went away across the orchard to her house. Then Mary turned to Hugh.

"Don't you think," said she, "you'd better go in and see your father?"

Hugh considered for a minute. It was, he thought, taking a base advantage of his father who didn't want to see him. But he felt, too, that because his father was incapable he must not be deceived. He must know his son was there.

"Yes," he said, "after we've talked about Grissie."

"What is it about Grissie?" asked Mary quickly.

"You'd better talk it over now," said Hugh. "I'll go in and see father."

XXXI

Hugh crossed the hall and opened the door of his father's room. He stood facing the bed and those eyes immovably fixed. Neale had heard the mingled voices in the other room and wondered; now, seeing Hugh, he thought he knew what had made the tumult. But his face did not relax. His hands, whitened from idleness, lay on the sheet, unmoving. Hugh stood there a minute perhaps, but what seemed to him a long time, taking in the strangeness of the room with its ordered conveniences adapted to this dark drama. The vines tapped at the window, and the light was pleasantly subdued; but it seemed to him this was no room in his father's house, only perhaps the embodiment of his father's misery. Neale's face he did not understand. He had not been used to interrogating it in the past; it was a cloud portending storm, to be escaped. Now it showed suffering, but nothing else. He had wondered when he heard about the accident whether Neale was lying there thinking back — to his youth, to the time when there must have been some softnesses for him to cling to, whether he had a thought of Mary who had had no tender words from him. But this was the face of mystery, as blank to all inquiry as the mask of death, but not with death's ineffable repose. All this Hugh thought in his minute, and then went forward and sat down, though wondering if he might, in the chair by the bedside.

"I've just got home," he said. "Mother told me to come in."

The questioning eyes did not turn to him. Hugh tried to think they could not. It was incredible to him, after the waves of death he had been riding there in France, that human eyes should not call to other eyes ready to meet them understandingly. Afterward he wondered if his father had built by accretion a shell about himself that would let no human seeking in, as it would let no emotion out.

"I've got a lot of things to tell," he blundered. "You know I've been in the war over there. I feel now as if I never'd been anywhere else."

But here Neale's eyes closed, and Hugh, dismayed by the sudden falling of that curtain, got out of his chair and went softly away, closing the door behind him. He crossed the hall and stood a moment listening. It was still within, and he was about to lift the latch when he heard his mother's voice exclaim: "My son!" in a tone of incredulous revolt and shame. It was not the moment for him, he knew, and he ran upstairs and tapped at Aunt Tab's door. She opened it at once, a queer figure in her short gown and petticoat with curl-papers rampant. She started back a step, aghast, and then all her pleasure came flooding into her face and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

"That's right," said Hugh. "Don't holler."

He stepped in and closed the door, took Aunt Tab into his arms and kissed her on both cheeks. This was not as he had kissed her when he went away. He understood her better now, and he had longed to get back to tell her what a cub that other Hugh looked to him. He pushed her into her chair and sat down opposite and smiled at her, a man, toughened by life as much as action, who had gone away a boy. Yet the boy, too, was mysteriously there. She found no trouble in accepting him.

"Hughie," said Aunt Tab, "have you learnt to play your fiddle?"

Hugh laughed out.

"Why, Aunt Tab," said he, "my fiddle's in a London lodging house. I haven't seen it for months, and I haven't thought of it."

Aunt Tab's brows drew together. She was much perplexed.

"There's no time for fiddling over there," said Hugh. "Didn't you have my letters? You know what I've been doing."

Aunt Tab shook her head.

"We've had the letters," she said, "but it's all dark to me."

"One thing you've got to understand right off," said Hugh. "I haven't been spending your money. I hadn't been on the sea two days before I saw what a chump I was — I don't know, it was the look of the sea maybe —" Here he stopped, finding he was leading her into mysteries, and began again. "You knew what I did. I met Payson, and we talked one day, and he took me on to work. And we've been in the Foreign Legion together, and some of your money you're going to have now and some after I've earned it, God knows how, when we've licked the Boches."

Aunt Tab was looking at him from a state of perfect bliss, adoring his manly brusqueness and acquiescing in everything he said, so he would sit there and talk to her.

"And Ben's married," said she.

"Yes," said Hugh, the cloud settling again on his face. "So I understand. I'll go down now and see him and mother again. You're a darling, Tabitha, and don't you forget it."

When Mary and Ben had been left alone, she turned

to him and asked, uneasy, a little breathless, and knowing, in spite of her, what she had to meet:

"What's this about Grissie Gleason?"

"Nothing," said Ben, giving her look for look. There was no guilt on his face. He was simply realizing that he had never fronted a world bare of the safety of his mother's love. He was not only afraid of her but of the world as it would be without her. There was something in the quiet majesty of Mary Neale that made you flinch, if you found yourself likely to show your smears before her.

"Ben," said she, "you'll have to tell me about Grissie. You'd better do it now. Did you promise her — things?"

"I didn't promise to marry her, if you mean that," said Ben. Then all his defenses fell before his mother's look and he broke out miserably, "I was a fool to go there and a fool to see her. It was all fun anyway. I had some money. I wanted to get it changed. I didn't dare to do it here. So I told her I was going to a hotel. And somehow she said she'd go with me, and then we went off on a trip. She didn't offer to. I didn't ask her. We were just — O mother, can't you understand? We got laughing and it was funny. So we went."

Mary was not looking at him now. She was afraid of seeing in his face some mean plausibility she could never forget.

"So you went to a hotel," she said, keeping her voice unmoved. "Did you say she was some relation?"

"Why, no, not exactly," said Ben fretfully. He thought she might be intelligent enough to help him. "That was the joke. It was the time everybody was talking about Peleg and Ardelia, and we called ourselves Mr. and Mrs. Peleg Simpson."

It was then that Mary cried "My son!" in that tone of pride in ruins.

"Don't!" said Ben. She stood there gazing past him, and he watched her apprehensively. But though he saw how terribly moved she was, he could not guess what revolt was raging in her. It was not that he had done his ill deed, but that he had, like a child, done it foolishly, in no urge of passion and despair.

"Well," said she, at last, "I'll say no more. Only, you must give up Ellen."

"Give up Ellen?" cried Ben. "I'm married to her."

Then Mary Neale broke out in a white heat of words that scorched:

"I don't care whether you're married to her ten times over. Ellen Brock is a good girl. And you — I'm afraid you're half-witted." It was on this that Hugh came in. He looked at his mother and saw she had been told enough to throw her into fury. But the fury went. She turned again to Ben. "You said you had money," she began. "Where did you get it?"

Ben was silent and looked immovably obstinate.

"There's no need of going into that," said Hugh hastily. "I understand about it, mother."

Mary turned to the door, and stood by it a moment, leaning against the casement.

"Don't be afraid," said Hugh, his mind flashing back with hers to the struggle on the knoll. The pain of his arm was likely to remind him of it for a long time to come. "We won't scrap again, mum."

"I don't care if you do," said something in Mary Neale's heart. "You may kill him if you like."

Actually she did not say it, but she always believed she did, and shuddered back from the memory. That one thought it was that taught her what it is to commit

the sudden great sins: for she always confessed to herself that she had done murder in her heart,— the murder of her son. The eating knowledge of it was so present to her that she bound herself then to a perfection of love toward Ben: the love of remorse that is like undying fire. She opened the door and went across the hall to her husband's room and shut herself in with him. All her memories of his impervious silence went down once more before the certainty that he was her natural refuge. She was blind with tears, and she crossed the room and fell on her knees and buried her face in the clothes beside him. She knelt there and sobbed, and after a moment he moved slightly and she believed his hand had touched her hair. The renewed wonder of it was enough to still her crying. She had not, in her heart, expected anything but to put her wet cheek against the rock of his endurance. She gathered herself together, with a long breath, and got up, but first taking the kind hand that had slipped from her hair and passionately kissing it.

"It's nothing," she said. "Only I'm foolish. Hugh's coming back and all — and thinking you're lying here."

This last she added to clench his belief that nothing actually was the matter. She could not have him suspecting ill and lie there raging over his infirmity. Then she went out and again into the room across the way, where Hugh stood looking from the window and Ben lay on the sofa, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, his hands clasped under his head. Mary judged they had not spoken. Ben sprang up, and Hugh turned quickly to her. They saw the tears on her face, and both remembered they had never seen her cry.

"Ben," she said, "about that money. Tell me where you got it."

"I gave it to him," said Hugh instantly. "I told you, mum."

"You're standing up for him," said Mary. "I want him to tell me himself. Ben, you didn't take your father's money?"

Ben did not answer. He was as resentful at being accused of the one offense as if he had committed none.

"Truly," said Hugh. "It was some of Aunt Tab's."

Mary looked from one son to the other. She believed it now, but they could not interpret her face.

"Your money," she said, "the money you were going away with!" There was no reproach in the words, but they had an edge. "Ben, you must forgive me for what I said."

He did not know what it was,— the murderous speech she uttered in her heart — but he was ashamed at her humility. He went to her and would have put his arm impetuously about her; but in spite of her remorse she drew away from him.

"No," she said, "no!" Then her sorrow over him broke out and she ended: "But don't lie to me."

Ben, repulsed, half turned from her. Again he had his feeling of being the criminal at the bar where everybody else was impeccable.

"I don't expect to lie," he said, "any more than anybody else. We all lie when we've got to." Then an impulse he hated himself for put the words into his mouth. "Anyway so I s'posed that time when you did — when you told father —" But there he stopped and, at a little muttered sound from Hugh, walked out of the room.

"Well," said Mary, smiling a little at Hugh, in a way that made him turn his eyes from her, not to see the piteousness of her face, "I deserved that. It's my punishment."

XXXII

That afternoon Mary Neale had perhaps the strangest half-hour of her life. Out of the wreck of circumstance, she knew one thing must be saved. That was Grissie. Hugh and Aunt Tab and she had their noon dinner together. Ben had vanished, where she did not know at the time, though it afterward appeared he had gone off with Trueman and came home late and asked Hannah to give him a bite in the kitchen. At dinner Mary could not eat for looking at Hugh, sitting there opposite her, bronzed, erect, hard as iron, the marks of thought and action on his face, though it was so young, but in his eyes the ecstatic light Ellen had called there and that had not for a moment gone away. All through the meal they talked about the things he had seen, and both women tremulously accepted his curt fiat that he was going back. Aunt Tab, who also left her plate untasted, sat with brilliant, staring eyes fixed upon him, and once or twice she opened her lips and did not speak. Mary did not ask about the fiddle. She was afraid it would recall the anguish of his giving it up, when he had been drawn into this splendor of willing death. But Hugh would have laughed and told her, as he told Aunt Tab, there was no anguish. He had tried to make it his voice while he was still inarticulate; but now he knew what his word was going to be. He and Payson, in their time of probation and training, had gone mad together over the written line that called louder to them than the roar of guns, and Hugh had in his pocket at that moment some verse that he might possibly show Larry. Payson

had said he "loved" it. Hugh felt superbly open-minded about it: only he had learned that the world is, in ways unexplored as yet, so large and rich a place that, if you don't get a chance to speak in one way, you very likely will in another. But when they rose from the table, Mary had a word to say to him.

"Hugh," said she, after Aunt Tab had gone into the kitchen to see if Hannah did not think it "the crowner" to have Hugh back again, "I don't want you to go over to Ellen's till I've found time to go with you."

Hugh looked at her in an immovable gayety of stubborn resolution:

"Do you mean I'm not to see Ellen alone?" he asked. "Why, mum, of course I shall. I'm going over there straight off."

"No," said Mary. "I'm going myself, to carry her a plate of dinner. And if she's there, and not down to Larry Greene's, I want you to go to Larry's yourself and stay the rest of this afternoon. And by that time I shall know what to do. But I don't want you to see Ellen."

"Mother," said Hugh, "I've got about a week to see Ellen in. After that, it's a toss-up. I mightn't come back. Don't look like that. I believe I shall. But I mightn't, you know. And I'm going to see Ellen every minute she'll let me. I should be a fool if I didn't. I've got to make up —"

There he stopped and shut his lips hard, and Mary saw she had a man to deal with, one who had, too, the suffering of a boy to remember, and that suffering, her jealous heart told her, she had never known. But she insisted.

"Wait," said she, "just this one afternoon. I don't know what can be done— "

"I do," said Hugh. "Ellen is going with me."

"Hugh," said Mary faintly, "that's against the law."

"Law or no law," said Hugh grimly.

"But," said Mary, "I'm sure of one thing. If she won't live with your brother, she can't live with you. And somehow, Hugh, whatever happens afterwards, we've got to do the right thing now. You can do that. Even if it's foolish, you'll do it. It's for her, you see. People are going to make a great handle of all this sometime. And they mustn't blame Ellen. If you love her, you'll be the first to say so."

In the end, after a good deal of obstinate demur, he promised, and then Mary filled a tray with food and set out with it for the little house, and Hugh followed her and took it from her and carried it across the orchard. At Ellen's door he gave it to her and then, without a word, turned back home again. Mary set down her tray and tried the door. It was locked, and before she could call, Ellen's voice within asked who was there. Mary had never heard her speak in such a voice. It was full and in a strange way exultant, as if something rich brimmed up in her. Whatever complications there were before them all, it was evident Ellen wasn't dwelling on them. Then she undid the door and Mary saw that the radiance of her look had lasted as Hugh's had done, and instantly, from the quick inquiry and fall of the brows that Ellen had expected Hugh to be with her. But she took the tray, with remorseful thanks, and Mary followed her in.

"I locked the door," said Ellen, flushing as she made this which seemed to her a silly plea. "I didn't know —"

There she stopped and Mary said:

"You were afraid it would be Ben. I think you'd better not see either of my sons, Ellen, at present."

Her voice sounded so proud that Ellen was suddenly

aghast and seemed to know what she had done. She turned cold, and stood looking at Mary forlornly. Mary was instantly compassionate; but she was tried with her, too. It seemed so unnecessarily stupid and loose-at-ends to marry a man to find out you couldn't live with him. But she was not going to console her at present. It was healthy, she thought, to suffer for a moment.

"I have asked Hugh," said she, "not to see you alone. I think he'll remember. But if he doesn't, I tell you the same. If he comes here, you're not to let him in."

Ellen, like Hugh, straightway looked obstinate, and Mary inwardly lost patience. What was the matter with them, she wondered, man and woman grown, seeing no further than their own wild wishes? And as Ellen continued to gaze at her in this heart-broken, imploring fashion, she had to speak, because they seemed to be slipping desperately off the rim of common-sense. "Ellen," said she, "you can't act that way. You're married to Ben. Don't you know you are?"

"But I told him," said Ellen, "I never'd live with him in all the world. And I never will. And now Hugh's come home, I see — I know —"

The strange exasperating look of radiance flew back into her face.

"Ellen!" said Mary Neale. She spoke patiently, as if she wanted to get her attention and keep it in this difficult matter of common-sense. "It isn't as if Hugh was a stranger to you. You've known him all your life. You must be carried away by his being in the war and all."

"Oh," said Ellen, "I'm not carried away. Yes, I am, but not the way you mean. Mrs. Neale, I've dreamed of him."

Mary was impressed, in spite of herself, there was such conviction, even awe, in the girl's voice.

"Well," said she, "what if you have? There's nothing more natural than dreaming about anybody you used to see every day or two, as you did Hugh."

"Oh, but that wasn't it," said Ellen eagerly. "It was different. It was somebody that came from 'way off, and he loved me and was beautiful. I dreamed of him when Hugh was here, too. Though then I thought Hugh was nothing but a boy. And when Ben began to be so nice to me, the dream stopped coming. And when Hugh came in to-day, I knew. He was the one. I'd called him the stranger, but he wasn't the stranger. He was Hugh."

She was so white, so passionately moved and sure of her ground, that Mary instantly believed as she did. It threw her back to that old time when the earth itself was smaller to her than the significance of one man, when she did not question or look beyond the circlet of the bond containing them. And, unconfessed, she capitulated. Mother jealousy went down before the force of passion unashamed, and she rejoiced that there was such a fire in the world, and warmed her hands at it.

"Well," said she, "I don't know what's going to come of it all. But your dinner's cold."

"I don't care," said Ellen.

"No, I s'pose you don't. I'm going home now, and you can lock the door behind me. And 'long the last of the afternoon some of us'll come over."

She got to the door, and saw that Ellen was watching her, a wary yet longing look, ready to fly to her if Mary held out a hand. But Mary perversely would not do it. She had lost that gritty ingredient of mother jealousy out of the pure water of life, but she couldn't quite take to her heart the bride she had kissed last night in the bridal chamber. Then she went home across the orchard and

found Hugh waiting to see her and say he was going down to Larry Greene's for an hour. But he hoped — he said it impressively — when he came home his mother would realize he must go over to Ellen's. Mary said nothing. She watched him away, the tall upright figure that had never looked like this a year ago, and felt she would have some ado to keep it from marching along wherever it wished. And then she took her parasol from the hall and went down the path and into the road. She dared not go into her husband's room lest he should, in some form, insist on her staying, and she knew Hannah and Trueman were at hand. She walked thoughtfully down to Grissie's, past Deacon Mendell's, where a flock of little Gleasons were digging dandelions; and Grissie, sitting on the front steps, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands, taking an interval of peace with the little Gleasons away, saw her and, in a sudden alarm, ran to meet her. Something, Grissie thought, must have happened to bring Mary Neale that way. Mary was tremendously relieved. She could not talk before the other Gleasons, and she had foreseen no means of getting rid of them. Grissie looked to her much like the little girl Grissie she used to know, only that she was irreproachably tidy. She had taken off her delicate dress and put on a short-sleeved apron that covered her from shoulder to heel, and her bare arms were milk-white and her thin neck a loveliness. How could they, she and Ellen, Mary thought impatiently, be so much their childish selves and yet create such havoc of accepted rules?

"I'll turn round," she said, "and you walk a piece with me."

So they went back along the road by which she had come, and when they reached the bars to what was known

as the "old sullar," on the Gleason land, she added: "What if we should poke in here a minute and sit down? We can talk better outdoors."

Grissie let down the bars for her and they walked in and then went round to what had been the back door of the house and sat down on the great door-stone. The raspberry bushes had grown up in the cellar and, with birch and wild cherries, made a screen. Mary furled her parasol and laid it on the grass.

"Grissie," said she, "I want you to tell me over again just how it was."

Grissie instantly began and told it quite eagerly though in an anxious way, and to Mary, listening, it was like an incredible dream that what seemed the child Grissie should have such a tale to tell. And that it concerned one of her sons whom it was easy to see as a little boy, just as Grissie was a little girl, was more incredible yet.

"He said he'd got a big bill, and he didn't know how to get it changed in Beckenham," began Grissie. "He thought they'd wonder where he got it and it would be all over town. So he was going to a hotel and pay his bill with it."

"But he was going to a hotel anyway," said Mary, "the one Larry goes to."

"No, he didn't," said Grissie. "He came to the house where I was. And next day we were out walking and looking in windows and we saw trips advertised and one was down south and I was crazy to go. So he said, 'Let's go.' And I said I would."

Mary looked at her, the little eager thing who seemed quite untouched by the defacing enemies of life, and wondered at her.

"But, Grissie," said she, "how could you say you

would? Didn't you know how strange it was, how — why, Grissie, didn't you know you couldn't? "

That was the only way Mary found to put it. She couldn't ask this bright-colored butterfly if she didn't know it was wicked. That would be absurd — to a butterfly. She couldn't accuse her of doing a vulgar or disgraceful thing. Grissie, even in the days when her skirt and waist didn't meet, was never vulgar. The Gleasons, out of pocket and out at heel, were, Mary knew, of the best blood in the county, and somehow she couldn't affront this soulless Grissie.

" But," said Grissie, " Ben didn't know anybody in Boston, and I didn't either, except the people in the boarding-house. And they didn't know. We didn't mean any harm, Mrs. Neale. Truly we didn't."

" Well! " said Mary. " And so you went? But you didn't keep your own names."

" No," said Grissie. " Ben said we couldn't. I saw that, too. 'Course we couldn't. And when we were thinking what we'd do, it came to us all at once — I don't know which of us thought of it first — and we laughed so we could hardly walk along. And we stopped and looked into a shop window till we got over it, people stared at us so. And they laughed, too."

" Yes," said Mary drily. " You called yourselves Mr. and Mrs. Peleg Simpson. That was what you laughed at."

Grissie had picked a raspberry leaf from the bush near her, and she was rolling it carefully in her little hand. And suddenly her absorbed face creased up and she began to laugh, and so delightfully, with a shrill abandon, that even Mary Neale, who was not given to irresponsible mirth, felt the relaxing of her own mouth and was sur-

prised beyond all understanding to think she might easily laugh, too. But this Grissie happily did not know.

"It was funny," she went on. She threw away the bruised raspberry leaf and began rolling another, with the same absorption. "You know, every time we said it or wrote it — we had to write it at the hotel — we could see just how they'd look, Peleg and Ardelia, if they were on their trip; and sometimes, when we were going sightseeing and nobody'd notice us, we'd pretend and act just like 'em. And Ben's awful funny."

Mary's mouth had lost all mirthful tendency. This was her son, indignant pride told her, a man who, at a time of tragic choice, considered it funny to act the part of Peleg Simpson. She hardly knew how to put Grissie to the last tests of all. Had the child been what Mary in her soul named wicked, and was she afraid of the outward disgrace that lay in what the country voice called being "in trouble"? But she could see no way to ask her. Grissie looked so untouched in her maiden delicacy, that it seemed polluting to suggest a further tragedy than she unrolled.

"Grissie," said Mary Neale, "what made you come to me? the other day, too. What made you come?"

Grissie turned on her a look of hurt surprise.

"Why, Mrs. Neale," she said, "Ben wouldn't answer me. I felt dreadfully about it. Don't you see how anybody would?"

"But if you'd been off with him and done a foolish thing," said Mary, trying her way, for still she did not dare call it a wicked thing, "you didn't deserve to have him answer you. I don't mean he wasn't to blame. Only, if girls make themselves cheap, they can't be surprised whatever happens to them."

"But Mrs. Neale!" said Grissie. She, too, found it difficult to go on. Yet she was laboring in no shame or confusion. She was simply finding there were other points of view, and it puzzled her. "Ben and I — why, we'd gone on the trip together and we played it was our wedding trip, and of course he couldn't go and marry another girl. That's why I've been working to pay off Mr. Luce. I found he liked me, and 'course I couldn't have it: for there was Ben."

"Grissie," said Mary Neale, "did Ben persuade you to do the thing you did?"

"Why, no," said Grissie, "nor I him. We just went, that was all."

"And when did you begin to think it was wrong?"

"I didn't think it was wrong," said Grissie, with spirit. "I didn't think anything about it till he wouldn't write to me."

"But you think now it was wrong," said Mary. If she once had that confession, it seemed to her she could make a theory of Grissie and find out what to do for her. Grissie was answering, patiently, as we instruct those whom we have answered many times before.

"Why, no, Mrs. Neale, I don't. Only I know it's wrong for him to marry Ellen. And I don't see how he can live with her. I don't believe the lawyers would let him, if they knew. For there's me."

She was looking at Mary, trouble in her eyes and her delicate brows drawn together, and as Mary returned the look, she thought she had never seen anything more jewel-like than the limpidity of Grissie's eyes. They were different from what they used to be. They had changed, all in a little time, to a softer brilliance, a truly appealing wonder.

"Grissie," said she, leaving moralities and leaping to the main issue of nature, which Grissie might understand, "you love him, don't you? You love Ben?"

For a moment Grissie's eyes did not falter. They seemed to be putting questions of their own. Then the blood ran up into her face and flushed it exquisitely.

"I never thought. I don't know," she said breathlessly. "I didn't have to think, we had such a good time. But now — it's different now. Why, he can't marry Ellen. For there's me."

And as the flush had come, tears followed, in a sudden flood, and seemed to surprise her as much as they did Mary, who had all Grissie's life seen her laughing but had never seen her cry. But it made her human, less like a little soulless thing who answered nature gayly and forgot the law. Grissie put her hands before her face and wept, and Mary passed her a handkerchief and then looked out across what was the back lot of the old house at the fringing woods beyond and thought of her. Mary did not formulate things definitely to herself; but her mind was the sort that penetrates, like a ray of light, to the heart of circumstance, and illuminates there what she might never be able to explain or classify. She saw Grissie, not as the child she had been, all outward swagger and careless satisfaction in the sun, but a Grissie where something had come awake, some seed of moral ardor planted by the old Gleasons who were moralists of an unbending code and would have judged this little light heart as bitterly as a willful Magdalen. Grissie was not judging herself; she was revolting against herself. The old Gleason spirit within her was condemning her, and she could not be happy because she did not feel the same. She had gone to the well with the vessel of her rapturous content, and it had been broken. The knowledge of good and

evil had come to her, without convincing her that her unthinking choice had indeed been evil; and she was different. She was, in a vague sense, undone. And Mary had a wondering admiration for her, almost an awe. Grissie, even under the stain of her wanton act, seemed delicately unspoiled, like the beauty of her skin and her lustrous eyes. She had stopped crying as suddenly as she began, and fluttered out Mary's handkerchief in the breeze, to dry it from her tears. And she laughed a little, as if she apologized for being so unexpected as to cry.

"Shall you go back?" Mary asked her.

"Yes," said Grissie soberly. "I must, to-night. I've got quite a lot of work. I don't know how I got it. But I've promised it. And besides I want to pay off Elmer Luce. I didn't know he was — that kind."

Mary thought, looking at the delicate grace of her, that she knew how she had got the work. When Grissie piped, to whatever tune, you wanted to follow.

They got up and stood there, looking off at the fringing woods.

"Well," said Mary, "I haven't said anything, have I? And I don't know what we're any of us going to do. What I should like, would be to have you leave it all right here where it is."

"Yes," said Grissie unexpectedly, "I will. I've got to, I guess. Only he can't live with Ellen. Nor she wouldn't want him to."

Mary frowned, standing there in her perplexity, looking at the waving woods. She and Grissie were just where they were in the beginning, only she had seen, for a moment, a beautiful Grissie she would never forget. They turned and walked back to the bars, and Mary, reverting to her vague sense of the old Gleasons and their morality, said absently:

"You know it was some of your folks that lived in the old house, the one that was burnt. I believe it was the last minister — there was a whole line of ministers — the one that shut up his daughter in a dark closet because he caught her reading a story book."

"Did he?" asked Grissie idly. "He must have been the limit."

She let down the bars and put them up again when they had gone through, and then she turned to Mary, in a child's confusion.

"You asked me," she said, and broke off to amend it: "You know what you asked me?"

No, Mary could not remember which thing she meant.

"If I — well," said Grissie, "if I loved him. It's awfully silly to say. But I do. Why, of course I do. That's *it!* You don't s'pose I should go off that way with him if I didn't!"

And she turned and ran, a figure of flying grace, along the road toward home.

XXXIII

Hugh spent two uneasy hours with Larry, talking hard of war, — grimly, for this was after the seventh of May — and not a word of Ellen. And because Hugh, with no background but his unfed hopes, going straight, with that chaotic interval, from " clouds of glory " to a world where the colossal and the horrible reigned in gigantic overthrow — because he had cast himself into the war to be molded by it while his atomic force molded in turn — the particle of granite in the cliff against the menacing tide — he became to Larry the spirit of the war, young manhood that had paltered with no hesitancies before it descended from the heaven of dreams to righteous conflict. The Hugh that had been, foaming with discontent, was gone. He was to be envied, Larry thought, thrown, with all his strength upon him, into this unthought-of world where the framework of a great necessity was the commonplace of life. It was a world where the trivial, the merely personal, had ceased to be. So the gods work out good in the face of evil and mold men.

In this uneasy talk they were both at fever heat because their minds were elsewhere. Larry questioned and Hugh answered in a stark literalness. At first, Larry felt as if he had to dig facts out of him. But he opened out gradually, perhaps getting Ellen to the back of his mind where she was not so obstructive, and unrolled the colossal pageant as he had seen it, not in any spirit of false bravado, as being a moving atom in the throng, but with

the vast simple common-sense soldiers learn when they are in the midst of their practical job and know it has got to be finished before the world can clear up its devastation. But suddenly Hugh got to his feet as if he could bear this diverted interest no longer — the vision of Ellen had somehow pressed to the front again — and said he must go home. Larry said he would go with him, really because he couldn't lose him out of his sight; and they went through the woods together, talking now not of war but of Payson. And here Hugh proved to have his conception of the hero.

It would be unproductive talking about Payson in this book, because he was killed later, and the world awoke to him and gave him all the laurels his young manhood could sustain. At the time Hugh knew him he was a pioneer, an adventurer into the realms of light he saw as poetry. He was going about the earth, learning it by heart before he put it into the verse flickering before him like the bravery of banners. He had done verse already, of an unclarified richness; but like Rupert Brooke and Alan Seeger he had to die actually unproven, because his temperate best was to come. He had made a tremendous impression on Hugh, translated his emotions for him, and called out from him a flow of energy that was, to anything Hugh had felt before, like the vibration of light. What Payson was doing, putting the world into poetry, seemed to Hugh easy enough. Words came to him in ordered sequence, pursued him, and would not leave him. Rhythm beat at his ears even when he was doing his great common-sense job of helping clear up the world. It was so simple to him that he didn't see how important it really was, as he would have seen it in the old boyish days if he had fiddled the universe into being as he captured it now with only words. While they were talking about Payson he

brought out a sheaf of his friend's verse and stopped there in the woods to read it aloud to Larry, with a warmth that flushed his forehead and dimmed his voice. It was beautiful, Larry saw, the youth of it, the embossing of imagery, the layer on layer of the forms of life. But when he had finished Larry asked: "Where's your own?" and with no hesitation Hugh brought out another sheaf, a slender yield. And while Larry read, Hugh stood looking into the tree spaces and thought now not of poetry but of Ellen and how he was to steal her to himself. Larry finished and took his turn of looking off into the woods, because his eyes were hot.

"It's good stuff," he said. "Let me keep it over night."

"Oh, yes," Hugh said indifferently. "I can remember it, anyway. And Payson's got a copy."

He was in a hurry now to go on to Ellen. Larry hadn't told him exactly how the verses struck him. Perhaps he couldn't in the unreadiness of the moment. They seemed to him first the most impulsive things he had ever read — they were simple in the extreme, of the clarity of New England air. But they had caught the universe as even Payson, who had gone about unveiling her face, had never done. Hugh was writing like a child, naïvely, almost as unconscious that other men had written as if he had never steeped himself in English founts. He might have been a young shepherd at the dawn of letters in England, singing the world. Larry, who didn't know much about Mary Neale, except her fine decorum, wondered afterward, the sweetness and the melody were so amazing to him, if they had come out of Mary Neale's unlettered marriage song. He had seen her as a bride. He remembered the look on her face, the rapt, misty adoration she turned toward Neale, who, having got her,

bent his mind to earning the place he coveted, denying her the bread of life. Was Hugh singing his mother's marriage song and accomplishing one of those divine compensations where our bitter waste springs up in largess? But Larry only told him it was good stuff and went on with him, enormously exhilarated.

When they went up through the lane they turned to the little house. Its windows were open, the doors were closed; Larry had an idea Hugh would find them locked. But he had not seen Ellen since Hugh came, and no one had told him she was not merely rebellious but also entirely happy. At that moment Ellen was sitting in her father's chair by the hearth, saying over and over to herself that he had come. "He" did not mean merely that Hugh had come home from the war. It meant that the lover who had made her so much trouble had come without doubt; and so strong was his hold on her that she did not at that instant think of Ben. The fact of her clarified consciousness was enough. It obliterated the hard steps that led to the clearing of the path. Mary was standing at her own door, waiting; and Larry, seeing her, decided he should only be in the way, and left Hugh hastily. Whatever the family could do about the family turmoil they wouldn't, he thought, want him. And he went on and up the hill to Squire Greene's. He had suddenly felt uplifted, breathed full of a keener air, alive to the vitality of every aspect of life. Hugh had brought him the tonic air. He had shown him the war in his little glass, through the pinhole of his insight, and it was as nobly worth the blood spent in defending it as Larry had known. And he had brought the fruit of his own extraordinary flowering of life. Larry felt equal to anything. He had one of those times when he felt lifted above the too brilliantly

containing sky, and he sang, as he went on, though not a warlike stave, and laughed a little, too, as he thought again he hadn't much to give the war, but he would give Brother Abial. There was a carriage at Abial's gate. Well he knew it, Sally Wheeler's chaise and Henry, neck stretched long and nose to the ground, reflecting. For a moment he paused, wondering if he had better go in, and then decided he would. However old Sally had come, whether in diplomatic neighborliness or to obliterate Abial under a pillow and sit on it while she picked his pockets, there would, Larry knew, be drama in the clash of wills.

He walked into the house, according to custom, the kitchen a lovely place in its conventional order, and through to the sitting-room. There he halted in the doorway, not only to give decent greeting but to laugh within himself at the significant picture. Sally Wheeler had come to make a call. That was the little group presented: Sally, upright, more disordered in her dress than Herrick's maiden but yet so patently a gentlewoman, Clara, eager, ingratiating, because, though she knew Sally Wheeler as she did the old lilac bushes in her front yard, it was an honor to receive a call from her, and Abial holding his head higher and essaying the English he would use at the Capital. When Larry, not very scrupulous of costume, for he had had a disordering day, appeared at the door, cap in hand, they looked up at him and Sally Wheeler's face flickered slightly, as if a smile had started and she forbade it. But Abial and Clara were distinctly annoyed, he with a sense of the unfit and even dangerous, and she in a tolerant way, judging that Larry was so odd, so droll she called him in her really admiring moments, that you could never know where social intercourse would get if he took the reins into his hands.

Larry sat down at once. He wasn't sure of being asked, and Abial looked at him unwinkingly and tried to frown him into decency.

"I'm on my rounds, you see," said Sally Wheeler, "collecting. Old linen, clothes, a little of everything — but chiefly money. Whatever I don't get, money I must have."

"You couldn't have come to a better place," said Larry. "Abial's the soul of liberality. 'Bial, I believe you've got all the family virtues as well as the family cash. You're like the old Greene in Revolutionary times. Do you remember, Sally? I showed you those entries in the town accounts. How he took on himself the expenses of the town poor for that year — no, it was for three years — and handed over his cash-box besides, and came out of the war broke and couldn't buy himself shoes to go to Washington. But they would have sent him, all the same, if he had lived."

"Yes," said Sally Wheeler, "they'd have sent him. He was a great patriot. I don't wonder you're so proud of him."

Abial's face had flushed slightly. It was not from emotional warmth so much as the physical response to praise.

"That's a different matter," said he. "'Twas our own war, when all's said an' done."

Sally Wheeler leaped to the argument.

"Ah, but this is your own war, too, Abial. This is a chance to show what a big American can do. Morgan — J. P. Morgan, you know — was ready at the start to furnish cash. He wasn't allowed, I understand; but it never'll be forgotten of him. These things are not forgotten."

"'Bial knows that," said Larry slowly. He looked at

his feet and pondered. It was true that Abial was the only thing he had to give; but how could he make Abial see it? "I wrote it out last night, 'Bial," said he, raising his eyes and looking at his brother, "the story I told you. It's the story of father's money and the story of the lot. And then I said to myself I'd wait a day. And if I got a warranty deed from Brother 'Bial before — we'll say — Thursday night, I'd tear up what I'd written and I'd never write it again. That's all, Sally," said he, turning to her, with one of the smiles Abial hated, really because he never could see what there was in life to make anybody smile so unreservedly. "I mustn't interrupt your call. But it's all right about the money. 'Bial's going to plank down handsomely, and we're arranging it through a dicker of land. He'll be remembered all right, along with the old Revolutionary chap. I shall put it down in the history."

He slipped so quickly out of the room that although Sally Wheeler called after him, "Wait and I'll go along with you," he did not seem to have heard, and it was the squire who went out with her and helped her waken Henry and reason him into the belief that it was he who was responsible for the chaise getting home. She had said good-by with a ceremonious courtesy to Clara and left her in quite a twitter, as if an honor had been done her, and she talked to Abial all the way down the drive about the beauty and dignity of the place and the glory of his name. He stood and looked absently after her while the chaise went wavering along the road. Actually he was thinking neither of her nor of Larry whom he could have cursed, but no more warmly than he cursed him every day for being a vagabond of a man, desirous of neither power nor place. Something had waked in him, not the love of good or the repudiation of ill. It was

something that took back to the men of an elder time and, standing there in the sunlight, he was afraid. Not of God. His god was a cast-iron deity who resided in the Old Testament and was appropriately interpreted to him by the Reverend John Peterson who saw heaven and hell like charted maps. But he was, for that minute, afraid of his father who had told him to share with Larry, and he was afraid of the story of Tabbie's lot.

XXXIV

When Hugh came up to his mother, waiting for him, he smiled into her eyes a little grimly, perhaps meaningly too, in a way that made her feel he was taking the right to challenge her decisive wisdom, and asked:

"Mum, don't you think we're plain silly?"

"Why?" asked Mary, though she knew.

"Building a fence round Ellen, when I've got less than a week to see her in."

"Hugh," said she, bent, though despairingly, on forcing him back with her to the safe, decent standards, "don't you realize Ellen was married yesterday?"

"Well, no," said Hugh, "I don't suppose I do. Anyhow, it's grotesque. It's a silly piece of business. It can't stand. It isn't going to."

"Anyway you can't go and make love to her," said Mary, plucking up spirit to combat her clever boy who now, with words pat to their purpose, was bewilderingly different and hard to cope with.

"I hadn't thought about that particularly," said Hugh. "There are quite a lot of things besides making love. But I'd like to feel I was sitting in the same room with her. Come on over, mother, if it's going to distress you to have me go alone. Let's go and sit in the same room with Ellen."

Mary yielded helplessly. What could she do, her adoring mind asked her, with a son who could argue her down and, when that failed, charm her into following? Ellen saw them coming, and met them at the door. She had

ideas about taking them into the sitting-room where Ardelia had kissed Peleg, and if she led them through to the kitchen that would be queer.

"Let's go into the orchard," said she. "The old seat's there still, Hugh."

He smiled at her, and she smiled back, with the same thought: that he had been gone so long things might have changed or been swept away. When they hadn't, it was wonderful. She came down the steps, and they went across to the orchard, Mary leading and the two behind her hand in hand. Mary was bewildered by the audacity of their assumption that the path was clear before them or that it could be made clear. She was angry, too, in a worried way, and this with Ellen. Again she asked herself the question she had been asking all that day: if Ellen could have found out, all in an instant, that there was nobody for her but Hugh, couldn't she have guessed it at least a day before? To that there was no answer. There never, to her mind, would be one. At the old seat under the gilliflower tree they stopped, each with a smile for her. Ellen's was a wistful, pleading one. She knew she had done a thing her world would find abominably wrong, and she was sorry: chiefly for Mary Neale. She hadn't got to herself yet. Indeed, it didn't seem of the greatest importance about her share in it, because the really overwhelming thing had already happened. Hugh had come home.

"No, I'm not going to sit down," said Mary, in despair of bringing them to her uneasy fears, and not actually knowing what she wanted them to do. For she would have defended Ellen against going back to Ben. That "Never! never!" was ringing in her ears. "And I can't stand here as if I wanted to watch you," she exclaimed, suddenly beyond her patience. "Hugh, if your brother

finds you here under the trees, looking as you do — poor Ben!" she ended miserably.

They were a sight to drive a jealous heart far, standing there, not hand in hand now, but side by side, as if, Mary angrily thought, they were waiting before her to be married. The sun rays struck through the trees and made a flicker on them. They were beautiful with the movingness of youth, and Mary, who had seen the romance of her own love go down in hungry endurance, knew again that here was the true fire and that she warmed her hands at it. She felt herself drifting with them, and reached out mentally for something to stay their course. The something she vaguely had in mind was what she called bringing them to a realizing sense. But Ellen had caught herself back. Mary Neale's face was drawing her, the distress on it, the perplexity already marking its fair surface. Ellen thought, with a quick rebound, she had no right to bring such a look to Mary Neale's face. In the passionate impetuousness of youth she declared to herself she'd rather die. But what could she say and where could she go? She was the first to see Larry coming along the road from Abial's, and she knew he would go in by her gate and home along the lane.

"There's Larry," said she. "Let's all walk down with him across the woods."

Mary Neale thought it was a silly thing to do, when they might go into Ellen's and sit down, if they'd got to talk impossible things over prematurely, with no one to advise, from outer standpoints; but she wasn't going to desert and hear afterward that they had met Ben on the wood path and the brothers' struggle had been renewed. Larry, who was exhilarated from his own encounter with queer things, seemed not to be surprised at their electing to trail him home, and Ellen left Hugh and went on with

him, and Mary and her son followed. And now Mary was briefly comforted because Hugh took her hand and they were the ones to walk in that childish intimacy. They didn't talk, beyond absent comments on the encroachments of little wood-citizens, "ivories" and trillium and the rest, that seemed always to be pressing into the path, to court crushing from the foot of man, and she noticed Ellen and Larry didn't speak at all. Only when they got to the point where the other path led off to the violet bank, Ellen called to Hugh over her shoulder in a voice Mary could not read in the light of anything she knew, and he called back:

"Yes, dear, I remember."

Larry knew what it meant and, with a sudden savage desire toward the completion of happy destinies, wished they would turn aside and go back to the old battle-ground and kiss and plight themselves unlawfully. But they all walked on, now in silence, to his house, and he opened the door for them and they went in and sat down, Mary suddenly, weakly, as if she felt the weariness of her part. And immediately Ellen pulled herself together, as she had determined to do, on the way, and spoke. She was not now trembling and flushed with happiness, but deeply grave.

"I'm not going to trouble anybody," said she.

"No," said Larry. "We know that."

"But," said Ellen, "if what I'm going to do is wrong, I shall do it just the same."

Mary watched her with a dull intentness, conscious chiefly of her tired head. What was she going to do? Something that would tire everybody's head still more?

"I don't know where I'm going," said Ellen. "I can't think."

That was it, Mary thought. None of them could think.

"But," said Ellen, in a voice that now made its way clearly, "I sha'n't stay with Ben. Not ever. Not as long as I live. Nobody'll know," she went on, turning to Mary with the look in her face that begged Mary to understand her, "why I thought I could. I don't know. But I never will — never! never!"

Mary seemed to hear the words through the closed door on the bridal night, and again her heart turned to Ben, pathetic in his deserted state. Larry's thoughts kept time with Ellen's words, an impetuous commentary. How could anything else have been expected, he raged, when youth was thrown uninstructed into its great natural battle? What was Ellen but a child when she had been drawn on by a million silent impulses to pledge herself to a compact as vague to her as it was safe and kindly? Even he had blunderingly influenced her before she was really awake, lest she go with her eyes the more darkly bandaged. He had made the love of man and woman the climax of earthly inheritance. Was it the climax? He was inclined still to think it was. But then there was, also, the honor and honesty of the lonely soul. Wasn't the great battle, after all, not the struggle to claim a mate, but the soul's striving to establish itself before the gods?

"Anyhow," he said, out of this last challenge of possibilities too big for him, "Ellen's got to do the square thing."

She couldn't know this was the breaking of a big wave that had heaved itself up in the sea of his mind; it sounded like a million other whispers she had heard that day from the rote of the world's accepted fiats.

"The square thing?" she echoed, turning to him, her

face a sudden flame. "Does that mean living with Ben because I promised to?"

"No," said Hugh, in a savage protest. "No, by God!"

Mary Neale had never heard her sons use the great words men swear by, and it startled her. She turned to Hugh, the shocked look on her face, and he misread it, and asked her passionately, "What do you say? Do you want her to do that, to be respectable?"

And again Mary heard the "Never! never!" through the closed door and said violently:

"No! no! she can't."

"So I say," said Larry. "I mean," he added to Ellen, in a gentleness that made her beg him to forgive her, in her heart, for thinking he could misread her, "you've got to do the square thing by yourself. If you don't love Ben — of course you don't love Ben, child!" he added, despairing over her stupidity—"you can't live with him."

"No," said Ellen, with a quick breath. "That's all then, all there is to it. Couldn't I stay a minute after you go?" She looked at Hugh and he got up and put out his hand to Mary who was pale, as if the strength had all gone out of her.

"Come on, mum," said he.

His thought was with her now. She was being tired tremendously, he saw. Whatever was to come, she must stay out of it. Ellen wasn't going to be hoodwinked into listening to Ben. He knew her old contrariness and smiled over it to himself. It would be their bulwark now. Mary Neale went without a word, and when the door had closed after them and Larry had come back to his seat, Ellen stretched out both hands and gave them to his eager ones.

"Larry," she said, "dear — oh, now I know how dear

you are. I know all about it — about everything. I saw it last night when I thought and thought — and today when Hugh came. And I saw how patient you've been with me. But, Larry, what shall I do now?" She hardly waited for the answer he hesitated for the wisdom to give. "I've wasted so much time," she went on, "trying to do what other people do. Because I thought that was the way."

"So've I, Ellen," he said sadly. "I've wasted all my life. Not doing what other people do, but being sulky and lazy and keeping out of the game. I give you my word I never knew the gates of the universe were wide open to every one of us. I never began to learn it till I saw what men do when the devil peers up over the rim of the world and claws at them. But you're a baby yet. You've got the years before you."

"You see," said she, "I've grown up. It isn't only because Hugh's come home. It's everything. Larry, I've grown up."

He thought he knew why she had waked. The sound of the guns had waked her. The great vibration that shook the earth itself had jarred the atoms in her as they had in him, and the shell of habit and unproved tradition had cracked and was fallen, and they — the inside being of them — saw light and felt the air. It was not that they saw grotesquely, through this waving of creation in the winds of destiny, that they looked to themselves like gods in this flare of a burning world and knew themselves to be, for all time, different. It was because they found the forces of honesty and calm decency were withstanding the forces that make for downfall and decay that they had waked to the certainty that truth is, justice is, endurance to the death is as inevitable a reaction as the violence that works for death. The war had opened be-

fore them the great book of life that lies at most times guarded by silent spaces and cold approaches, and they saw the necessity of the moral code — which is, after all, the code of truth and beauty. What you think every day gets its reward in what you do on a day when your need is greatest. These two had sat in this room telling each other all these months how wonderful — and how simple, too — it was that plain men were drowning in blood "over there" that the world might live. And it made it quite impossible for them to want to do anything ever in all the processions of the years but to be themselves as obedient and as true. And after all, they did not talk about it.

"There's a lot of things you ought to know," said Ellen; "but I can't tell you." How could she tell him that the flaring up of her old obstinacy and contrariness had saved her from the false fulfillment of dreadful rites, and that still she was her own to give or to keep for the earth to take her back untouched in its apointed time? "But," she added, her mind returning tenderly to him and his patient love for her, "wherever I go, your flag'll go with me."

"Ellen," said he, "you're not going to be headstrong and run away — or anything? Where are you going?"

"Truly," said she, "I don't know."

"Not with Hugh — if he begs you."

"Why, no," said she, with a surprised little air that he could ask it. "I can't, can I? Think of the promises I made to Ben. I'm going to break most of them, not all. I sha'n't forget I made them. And about Hugh — well, it's no matter."

"What's no matter?" asked Larry.

"It's no matter whether we're together as — we'd like to be. There's forever, Larry."

He thought Hugh could convince her there was no lure in a barren forever when you want love by your side. She had not, in this misty dawning, met the hardest tests.

"Besides," said Ellen, "I wouldn't have Hugh marry me and settle down here if he could — not for a long, long time. I want him to be free, and go back and fight and see things and lick the Boches. That's what he said, lick the Boches."

Larry remembered the nights when David Brock had sat with him in this room and they had smoked slow pipes and broken much silent communion by the talk of other lands and other worlds. David Brock hadn't been content to be a citizen of this earth only. He had seen the stars with eyes other than the gaze that tells the weather by them. The lure of adventure had been on him. It was on Ellen now. It had been on Larry ever since the first guns sounded at the Marne. He had seen like a sign in the heavens one thing: that adventure is always at your call. Open your door and you find a path that leads straight into it: the adventure that lies in calling on the gods and commanding them to tell you what they want. For you can command the gods. They know it, and only when you cease to batter at their thrones do they sink back on rose-leaves and idly pass the cup. And ever while they pass it they wonder among themselves: why do the earth-born strip their rose-leaves for us and brew the liquor of forgetfulness? We don't need their worship. We need them to be whanging their swords against the gates of our omnipotence, and waking up the old dreams we laid aside for a century or two because we thought there were no men brave enough to make them true. Even the gods can't give you what you do not ask: for the gods are not gods if there are no men. Even you, so small as you are, can bring drow-

siness upon their eyes by going a long way off from them and ceasing to clamor at their gates. The gods, Larry concluded, were now awake. And when you have roused them and puffed the wind through their rose-leaves and knocked the jorum out of their hands, they are very much awake indeed, and they are as likely to hear little voices, the faint footsteps of Ellen and Larry approaching the gates of being, as they are the thunder of a million wars. Indeed, they do hear everything. He knew that. But man must speak in a fashion that shows he means business. Ellen got up suddenly and her eyes filled with tears. The picture of her then was a rich treasure she was unconsciously giving him.

"Larry," said she, "I do love you. Remember."

Then, at the same instant, it came to them that Hugh had sent her a prayer in that word and how deaf she had been to it. Larry's face was, in spite of him, miserable with pain. Yet she did love him, and he would remember. There was his path to adventure. But Ellen had a thousand thoughts that come in the spring of life when all is new. She saw herself bound to Hugh by an ecstasy of ordained delight. At this moment of her love she hardly needed to see him because the sense of him was so bewilderingly with her. And Larry was dear to her in a way as real. It was all enchanting, rich, new, like the singing brooks and birds of spring. She got up to go, and he told her he would walk with her through the woods.

"No," said she, "truly — no. Not this time."

His mind leaped with hers, and he knew why. She was going to the violet bank. He stood at his gate and watched her away, and she turned, just before she vanished in the woods, and waved to him. Smilie, who, according to custom, had gone part way with her, came

loping back, much as if she had heard Larry's inward hurry call. He didn't want to watch Ellen out of sight. He wanted to get into the house with Smilie before that last vanishing.

"Come on, old girl," said he. "Don't look. This is the last we shall see of her."

He meant it was the last they would ever see of the Ellen of that day and mood, who was still partly theirs and not veiled by another glamour, as she inevitably would be when Hugh and the earth got hold of her.

Ellen did turn aside at the curve in the path and went as fast now as she could cross the wandering roots, to the violet bank, and there she fell on her knees and put her face to the ground and, in the simplest unconsciousness, loved it and felt herself obedient to all the earth expected of her. She was an unspoiled creature, full of natural impulses, and she did her earth worship the more faithfully because she had, for a moment, realized the march of stars.

When she got home, no one was there, but she found a little tray on her table, bread and milk and delicious things Hannah had been at pains to cook because Hugh had come. It was dear, and funny, too, and Ellen, as she ate, thought she would have to go away or get food from somewhere: she could not have Mary Neale bringing trays.

XXXV

That night Ellen, after she had eaten from the little tray and thought again how absurd it was to have it and how kind, tidied her room and sat down by the window looking out on the path that came to her back door. It was a clear night with an early moon and all the bewildering scents of spring. She sat expectant. Some one, she knew, would come, and she dared not ask herself who it might be. It was impossible to fit her mind to the task of planning the next immediate act, there was such tension in the air. And as the moon rose and threw things into a glamourous revealment, a step came along the little path and up to the door, and a hand tried the latch. When the steps went past her window she shrank back, her heart beating thickly. Not for large rewards and penalties would she have assured herself, by looking, of the man's identity. If it were Hugh, what should she say? What could she urge in denial of him? But the voice came at once on the vain trial of the door and it was the voice of Ben.

"Ellen," it called, "let me in."

This was not the voice of Ben as she had known it, all careless fun and laughter and a lazy tolerance of rebuff, since he could subdue the time to his liking, but dissatisfied, fretful, perhaps, above all, mandatory. Ellen shrank down into her chair and did not answer.

"Ellen," said the voice again, "let me in."

Now she was, if not afraid, because that was impossible, she told herself, since it was only Ben, uneasy, in a

pulsating, choked way, and involuntarily she thought how loosely the screens slipped up, and what a light agility he had in his slender strength. It was not, indeed, that she was afraid, but that she had an unreasoned distaste for entering into any sort of intimate communion with him. Since she had received him into that monstrous nearness of promising fealties that took hold on the present and the future, up to the day of her death, she was infinitely removed from him. Again he called her. And now there were other steps and the voice of Hugh.

"What are you doing there? Don't you see the door is locked?"

Ellen had not known of the struggle on the knoll, but she felt instantly that they must not be left to themselves, the two in the night, to match their intemperate wills, and she got up and ran to the door, though even so she did not open it. Ben had not answered his brother, but he stood on the upper step, looking down at him. He had, though this Ellen, behind the closed door, could not know, an attitude of supremacy, of the master of the house.

"Come out of that," said Hugh, in a voice he thought he was controlling to a decent steadiness. "The door is fastened. That's enough."

"It's not enough for me," said Ben. His voice was full of rage, a violence no one had ever heard in it. The scorn and despite of the time had lashed him into a sick fury he had actually never felt. Why, he had been wondering all day, was the world against him in this incomprehensible fashion? What had he done? His penalties, so unjust were they, seemed to throw his mistakes into nothingness. "I'm waiting to speak to my wife."

"Don't talk like a fool," said Hugh, at once on fire. "If you mean Ellen, say Ellen."

"I mean my wife," said Ben obstinately. This was a way, his impish mind told him, of irritating, to a point of madness, and yet of keeping within his rights. So he repeated the words again: "My wife."

"All right," said Hugh. "You can stand there and make a fool of yourself, if you like. I'll wait. But the instant you try to break into the house, I'm ready for you."

He began to walk back and forth in the path, whistling, his hands in his pockets, his face tilted to look at the sky. And while Ellen, behind the door, wished, in woman's maternal way, that they wouldn't be silly and would go home to bed — yet secretly indeed relieved to know Hugh was pacing back and forth there, her defender — there came another voice, the voice of Larry.

"Boys, what the devil are you doing?"

"Nothing," said Hugh, and Ben responded sulkily, but with a sneer: "Nothing."

"I came over to see if Ellen's all right," said Larry. He raised his voice. "Ellen, are you all right?"

"Yes," called Ellen, so near the door that Ben stepped back a pace. "I can't let you in. Nor anybody. Good night."

"Of course not," said Larry. "Go to bed. And, boys, you go home."

"Go home yourself," said Ben. He sat down on the top step and then got up again, he seemed to be at such disadvantage sitting. "I've come here to speak to my wife. What are you here for?"

"To stay," said Larry.

"Yes," said Hugh, as quietly. "We'll all stay. Ellen, run up and go to bed. You're not to talk to any of us to-night."

There was silence for a little now, and Ellen went back

to her window and looked out. She could not see Ben but she did see Larry and Hugh pacing back and forth sometimes avoiding each other on the path and again lounging away from it and taking a circle on the grass of the yard, or stopping to look, she could imagine, at the moon, hands in pockets and heads back-tilted. The absurdity of it came over her, the terror, too. For the moment they seemed dumb animals, unproven in their ferocity, padding about in the dark, some for defense, one for the assertion of angry rights. Ellen was no coward, but the strangeness of it keyed her to highest pitch; and as familiar faces are sometimes distorted by our fears, when they come to us in the dark, she shuddered before the strong earth power of them. Yet this was Larry whom she loved and trusted in a way as unthinking as a child's, Hugh who was her lover, and Ben, dear playmate she had wronged. But the earth, the strong forces of it, had power over her that night as it had when she smelled it on the violet bank. Sometimes the earth does embody itself like that and terrify us, just as the dark forces of war cause the accustomed tranquillities to shudder back and hide their eyes. There are moments when all the old rites, the old sacrifices, rise up and say: "We are here. Pay us tribute." Ellen might have been the savage woman hiding in the brake, shuddering at the clangor of bloody turmoil among her masters and sickening over the certainty of its aftermath — rapine and ruin. The earth spirits had her, and she was in panic, though, she told herself again, these were only the three she knew to the depths of kindliness, and even Ben had but shame and misery in his heart. After an hour of it perhaps — it seemed to her half the night — she ran up in the dark, and gathered her night things together

— irrationally she tucked Larry's little flag in, too — and then she crossed the sitting-room to the other side of the house where they could not hear her, took the screen from a window and dropped to the ground beneath. She picked her way carefully to the road, opened the gate and closed it softly behind her and again stole on with caution. But when she had got below the Neales', walking on the grass at the side of the road, she began to run.

Meantime, while she was still upstairs, Ben, unbearably moved by the absurdity of his stand before the door he could not enter, walked down the steps and, without a look at the others, across the orchard path. Hugh and Larry were silent until he was out of ear-shot. Then Hugh asked:

"Gone for good?"

"Yes," said Larry. "You'd better go, too. Your mother'll worry."

"I'll ask her to come over," said Hugh, "and stay with Ellen."

"She can't. Your father'd miss her."

"But I won't have Ellen frightened."

"Frightened at Ben? He doesn't want her to be frightened any more than you and I do."

"No," said Hugh doubtfully. "Not at any other time. But to-night — the devil's got into everybody to-night."

They began their pacing back and forth, Larry in the path and Hugh beside him.

"You mustn't forget," said Larry finally, "you and she are young. You've got a lot of time before you."

"I've got this week," said Hugh.

"You can't do anything in it. Leave it all, Hugh. Trust to her. She never'll live with him. And some-

thing — something legal —" he hesitated. "It'll have to be done."

"I can't stop to think about that," said Hugh, "talking, putting off — and I'm going back, you know."

"Ellen!" called Larry.

The silence of the house answered him adequately, though he did not know it. She was willful, he thought, indignant with them, perhaps contrary in her old sweet way.

"Ellen!" he called again. "Ben's gone, and we're going. But I'll stay in the edge of the woods, so you won't be alone. I shall hear you breathe."

He thought that would move her. She would surely tell him to go home to his bed and Smilie. She was no more afraid, he thought, than a shy fox in the night. But there was no answer. They waited a minute and still the lonely house did not tell them what it knew. They turned away together, and at the lane Hugh stopped and said, with a ring of something envious in his voice:

"How you spoke to her then!"

"What do you mean?" asked Larry.

"As if you knew her — as I don't know. Why don't I, Larry? Why can't I get near enough to know her? I could, in these few days even, now she understands. But you — I suppose, in this time I've been away, you've got to be great friends."

There was pain, not quite jealousy, in his voice.

"Yes," said Larry simply, in no triumph. "We're friends. It began when she was a baby — almost. You know all about that. Her father and I used to talk by the hour, and Ellen sat hugged up to him and watched us both with her great eyes. I've often wondered what the deuce she thought we were talking about.

Perhaps it sunk in without her knowing it, and now it's coming out. David Brock was a good deal of a man. There was honesty in him — and revolt."

The little tinge of jealousy ran out of Hugh; but he was sad.

"Larry," said he, "do you s'pose I shall ever get her?"

"Why," said Larry, "you've got her, haven't you? She won't look at anybody else."

"But there's such a devil of a time to make up — years when she wouldn't speak. I don't mean literally, you know. I mean when we neither of us spoke as we do now. I couldn't. She wouldn't listen."

It seemed to Larry if he had youth before him he could wait in a certainty that in the end, not so far off, he would compass his warm earthly happiness. But he only said, in a dull solacing:

"It'll be all right. Ben won't bother her. He's a decent fellow. He's only indecently tiresome now because he's so mad. And you can't blame him. Whether he loves her or not, he's lost her. And he's been made ridiculous, for no fault of his. Come, go home to bed. It'll plague your mother to have you vagabonding round. I'm a kind of a night-owl, you know. I won't be far away."

Hugh did go home across the orchard and found his mother at the step, waiting for him. She put her hand on his shoulder, when he came up to her, and though it was firm he imagined he felt the tingling of her relief to have him close.

"Where's Ben?" he asked.

"Gone up to bed. Hugh, you'll go, too, won't you? You've got hard days before you."

It was a curious echo of his father's spur to work:

"It's goin' to be a hard day to-morrer." That would probably never be said again in the old peremptory way. He took his mother's hand from his shoulder and kissed it, and she caught her breath once, as if she might have sobbed.

"So Ben's gone up?" he said.

"Yes," said Mary. "Some time ago. Hugh, I've put you into the shed chamber. You boys won't want to be together —"

"Not yet," said Hugh.

He knew that was the word she wanted to add. So he kissed her good-night and went up to the shed chamber.

Ben had really gone up to bed and then had got softly out of his window and slipped down the trellis, the old way when stairs were "no thoroughfare." He stopped a minute close by the house, to listen. Aunt Tab came to her window, he thought, and then stole away again. From his father's room there was no sound. He went out over the grass to the road, and hurried down the way Ellen went later, and under the trees where Mary and Grissie had talked that other day he found Grissie waiting. She was a little dark figure, shrouded, though it was so warm, in her mother's cloak.

"Is it you?" said Ben, when he came up to her. "I thought you'd gone."

"I meant to, but I couldn't —" said Grissie, and immediately she began to tremble, and Ben was sorry for her because she had always been so equal to the moment, daringly in advance of it, indeed, the laughing creature who had beckoned him on. Instantly, in the face of one who prized him enough to shudder over their common destiny, he felt a rush of answering emotion. Hugh and Ellen were triumphantly ranged against him. His mother was only, he knew, unwillingly friendly because

he was her son and she had a duty toward him. But here was Grissie who had never set a hindrance in the way of being unreservedly his own. He put out his hands toward her and they touched her slender shoulders. He would have caught her to him, but she stepped back and his arms fell.

"Why, no, Ben," said she. "You can't do that. You can't kiss Ellen and me, too."

"I haven't kissed Ellen," said Ben angrily, enraged at the childishness of his plight.

She gave a little cry at that. Such relief it meant — Ben wondered, at the moment, that he could be vital to anybody.

"Is it me?" asked Grissie. She forgot all her brilliant work at the Academy, and pounced on her joyous pronoun? "Does she believe it about me? Did you tell her? O Ben, did you?"

"I don't know whether she believes it or not," said Ben. He could not tell her about Hugh. Kind Grissie, who loved him as he was and didn't shy at the realities, was still in some outer room where all the Gleasons lived, not quite to be admitted to that inner place with Hugh and his mother and Ellen. Though he didn't love Ellen, he assured himself. He wasn't going to love anybody that gave him so much trouble. "But," he added conclusively, "she won't live with me. And I sha'n't ask her to. There'll be no trouble about that. I shall see Pettis."

Grissie understood. Sometime, some blessed time, the cruel deed was to be undone, and she and Ben would be as they were before, and he would marry her. But though Grissie had fronted life in the mad triumph of her young body, she had not learned that things would not be the same again. Ben might return to his old idle

acceptance of the world as it is to the atoms of the air, and she, because she was the kind of woman to respond to what the man demands, would answer his least whim of pleasure with a whim as light, like thistledown blowing together down the wind. But the old Gleason rigor of decency and prescribed godliness come awake in her would lie hid and secret in her heart, and be for the constraining of her children to what life mysteriously demanded.

"Good-night," said she.

"Good-night," said Ben.

They turned and left each other, and each wished inwardly the other would run back with some warm, childish cry. And then, as Ben was walking slowly homeward, he saw another figure coming through the dusk and knew it to be Ellen. At the same moment he saw she was hurrying breathlessly, and it came to him she was running away from them all. She saw him, he knew, she must have recognized him; but she bent her head and sped past, the width of the road between them. Ben walked slowly on. Something choked him. He wanted to call to her, to tell her she needn't run: there was nothing there to hurt her. His heart was up in his throat with misery for her, poor little Ellen, who was always queer but nicer than anybody else. And then he remembered how he had damaged his cause by standing at her door and demanding to be let in. If he called to her now, her heart would run faster and her feet would try harder to outspeed it. He stopped, now that she was well out of range, and listened. She would be going by the Gleasons'. Would she see Grissie? And where was she going? Was there anything as foolish in Ellen as there was obstinate and passionate? Could she run into harm? So he turned and followed her, fast, at first,

until he had got by the Gleasons' where there was laughter from the unlighted house, and then, when he caught sight of her through the darkness, slowly, so that, if she looked behind, she might not be desperately hurried on again.

XXXVI

Next morning, just before the dawn, when the birds began to call, Larry, at the edge of the wood where he had watched and thought of the earth and the stars and the cold wet air that was creeping under his skin — the last with a rueful smile over the way fate throws us in the race by the simple expedient of stiffening up our legs — closed his vigil and went home. Nobody could terrify Ellen, he knew, now that the foes of night were not by to scare her with unreasoning panics. As soon as the blessed sun was up, Hugh would still be gloriously Hugh to her; Ben would be only Ben. Smilie, shut in at home, greeted him wildly with a wholeheartedness free of reproach for the treachery of denying her this amazing adventure of a night away from walls, and they had early breakfast in the peace that comes of habit happily renewed. After all, Larry told her, she was the best of old girls, and he wouldn't treat her so again.

"You'd have acted like thunder," he explained to her, "and barked and roused the whole neighborhood."

While he sat smoking his pipe at the window, some one drove up: Brother Abial in the shiny buggy, himself in his go-to-meeting suit. This was a portent, so early in the morning, but Larry understood. Yet, as he went out to meet his brother, his heart knocking at her walls in sheer excitement, he told himself he probably didn't take it in, for the thing simply couldn't be. Abial was a fine figure of a man, sitting there in his prosperous state. He had shaved that morning — this did not happen daily

— and, scrutinizing himself after the ceremony, told himself he did actually look like the latest silhouette of the eighteenth-century squire. It was true. There was the lovely line of forehead, nose and chin. But what had Abial himself, clumsy artificer, done to the face in the time he had had the molding of it? That Abial, you will never know. When the world denies you the tribute that line of forehead, nose and chin demands, you will mutter over your bad luck. You won't divine that while you fashioned your destinies you were at work also on your face. Larry went out to him, and speciously forbore the ironical salute of two fingers to his cap. He wasn't going to antagonize him at the start. Abial sat in the wagon, reins loose and horse easing a glossy neck, and stared unseeingly down the road. It was an effort of the will that turned him to his brother, though for a moment he could not look at him, so distasteful was the speech he had to make. But when he did compass it and Larry returned his glance seriously, not at all like a triumphant creditor who had made a successful deal and was not above crowing, he felt he could, though grudgingly, begin.

"What was it," said he, "about somethin' you wrote?"

"I'll get it," said Larry. "It's type-written. You can run your eye over it easily."

He went back into the house and returned with the type-written sheets. He was glad his vaporing about the stories had not been a bluff. It might have been, he knew. Conscience didn't enter into this little drama of the grotesquely possible. Abial took the papers and held them at a convenient distance, and then, deciding it wouldn't do, after all, muttered his distaste for eyes that showed their age, got out his spectacles and put them on. Then he read. The soft morning air fluttered

the pages slightly; but nothing, Larry thought, could move that face. The spectacles did queerly lend him a tinge of benevolence. Now he was like a grandfather Greene who used to carry stick cinnamon in his pocket for little boys. Larry stood there in the unmoving attitude of the man who waits upon the decision of another, not obtruding himself, not indicating any personality of his own. Indeed he was acutely afraid of breaking the moment by the kindling of old antagonisms. He wanted to get to the horse's head and whisper a few observations while they were both idle, of the relation of the world to horses and men, but he dared not do it. He put his lips together to whistle, and then realized Brother Abial mustn't be jarred in his balancing of values. Larry had become as nearly negative in his relation to the universe as it was possible for him to be when Abial finished the last page, took off his spectacles and returned them to their case. But he gave no sign of remembering there was a waiting Larry in the world. He looked straight before him into the distance, and frowned. But he did not give the papers back. Finally, unwillingly, as he had before, he dragged his gaze circuitously to Larry. He could not look at him directly. The gaze went over his head.

"Is this the kind o' stuff you print?" he inquired.

Larry still stood unmoving, and he answered meekly:

"This is better than most of it. You see, when I do New England stories I have to make 'em up. But these were true, 'Bial, don't you see? They were the better for that. Don't you know there's a saying: 'Truth is stranger than fiction'? Well, it is. It's more interesting. People'd rather have it. They're all the time trying to get it — and pay for it. There's no comparison in what they'd pay."

"Then," said Abial, as if he had him there, "if you can get more for the truth, what makes ye write lies?"

"Different reasons," said Larry, in a persistent sunny patience. "Sometimes the truth is dangerous. You can't put it in print. You'd get into trouble. Sometimes it would hurt folks' feelings. You couldn't do that, you know."

"You're willin' to hurt my feelin's," said Abial, in an unexpected burst. It surprised him, too. He had not meant to make appeal to Larry. "You're willin' to attack your own brother."

Larry came a step nearer. He thought of laying a hand on the wheel, or putting his foot up on the hub, in the country way of settling to a talk; but he rejected that. Some inner sensitiveness of perception told him if he assumed a fraction of familiarity with Abial's wheel he would be removing himself irrecoverably from the man's acceptance, so delicately poised were the values in that intemperate mind.

"'Bial," said he, "I've got something now to live for — and it isn't the old place or the things I wanted when we were young. It's this war and the way it comes out. I can't go. I'm not trained for anything. I can't fight. I'm too old and groggy. The only thing I can do is to give 'em money: for the hospitals, you know, or even tobacco to make some fellow fight the harder. Now you've got money. It isn't mine legally, not a cent of it. But, by the Lord, 'Bial! it's mine according to any verdict there's likely to be if you and I stand up together in that court John Peterson threatens you with on Sundays. And father'll be there, too, you know. Father'll be a witness."

"You needn't think you can scare me," said Abial. "An' if you threaten me with hell fire, it's blasphemy."

But his lips were white. Abial was a deacon and he did believe in his Hebrew God.

"I can't make you fork over to the Allies," said Larry. He wasn't speaking now in the exasperating way he had regularly in pickle for Brother Abial. He was talking quite gravely and simply. That other manner, like the ironic salute of two fingers to the cap, had always driven Abial to an inner madness of revolt. It seemed to imply vast reserves in Larry of things he knew and Abial couldn't even approach by hearsay. It told him Larry had city friends who were college men, and that Abial couldn't get even a barren nomination. "I can't make you fork over the money father meant for me," said Larry, "nor Tabbie's lot. But I have written out, as you see, the story of Tabbie's lot, and the story of father's last bequest to me — no, no, 'Bial, not legal — you're right there — not a shadow of legal value in it. And those two things I've written better than I ever did anything in my life, and I can get a hundred apiece for 'em. And that I can turn over to the Allies. But I'd rather you'd do it, 'Bial. I'd rather tell Sally Wheeler you made over a piece of real estate — Tabbie's lot, you know — and the sale of that went to the fund."

"What do you want it for?" asked Abial. "Why won't money do ye?"

"Because," said Larry, "I feel as if the account with Tabbie had got to be squared — somehow. I told you I'd no pride. Well, maybe I have, a little. I don't want to put that transaction into the anecdotes of the history of Bromley. I prefer it shouldn't be handed down from generation to generation that Squire Greene did an ignorant old woman out of — we won't say how much money. But I've had the lot appraised. I have my figures and I shall print."

Abial's hands trembled as he held the pages tighter. Then he tore them straight across, and again the other way and again. The scraps of paper floated out over the roadway.

"There!" said he. "Pick 'em up an' piece 'em together. That's all you'll get from me."

"I sha'n't need to," said Larry. "I've got the whole business right here in the house. Besides, if I hadn't, I could write it over again. Maybe I could write it better."

Abial gathered up the reins, set his face to the front and drove on. Some of the white scraps of paper had settled in the wagon and he pulled up, a little distance down the road, gathered them carefully and threw them on the grass. Perhaps he was afraid of them, the symbols of an art mysterious as witchcraft. In spite of himself he was tremendously moved at the power of the unknown. He had never read Larry's little tales of New England life. Clara had, and declared they were about folks such as she'd seen a hundred times, and she shouldn't think he could get his living out o' that. She shouldn't think they'd bring twenty-five cents apiece. It showed what the newspapers were put to, Clara declared, if they couldn't manage anything better'n that. Abial judged, though he hadn't read them, that they might bring a dollar and a half, or, as he liked to say, taking back to his forbears' speech, nine shillin's. He thought no editor would have the brass to offer less. But now, for the first time, he was face to face with the printed word, and it had shaken him. If this had been the bald statement that Abial Greene had persuaded Tabbie Neale to sell him a wood lot for one-third its value, he would have rejoiced grimly in his own productive cunning. But here the magic of art had come in, and Larry had, out of the

witchery of his fancy, conjured up the scene itself. There was Tabbie to the life, in her fly-away clothes and her twittering foolishness, walking willingly into the trap; and there was Abial — he wondered if he looked like that. There was the description of his statesman face as he had seen it that morning when he shaved. Yet, the story declared, there were mean lines in it. Was that true? However, it didn't matter. Only, strangely to a man who knew no more of the witchery of the pen than the witchery of the brush — the same pen that makes wills and deeds, the brush that paints a window-casing — here was Tabbie's talk to the life. Here was his own response. Had the sneak, he wondered, been listening? Yet that, he knew, wasn't possible. He trusted Larry to the last defenses of civilized life. Larry was, he had often said, too much a fool to be tempted to his own advantage. Perhaps that wasn't really all. Perhaps Abial, in the hidden self that lived in him unrecognized and starved of light, did put Larry with the dead and gone Greenes who were immaculate in their public honor and made his bulwarks out of pride in them. Perhaps that unacknowledged pride did demand he should account to himself with a good reason when he fleeced his antagonist; and he was accounting. The other story, a stark little sketch of his father's death-bed, did not seem to him such witchcraft. Larry had seen it. He had been present there. But what magic had betrayed to him the faithful drama of the selling of Tabbie's lot? However, he swore it was nothing to him and no man should rush him into making over land he had come by honestly. And all the time, Tabbie's deed was buttoned tight into his pocket and he was driving with it to Beckenham.

Larry watched the wagon whirling down the road, and

then he gave a yell that brought Smilie to the door, clawing at it and beseeching him through the screen. He ran back to her, but not to let her out.

"We've got him, old girl," said he. "He doesn't know it yet, but it's so. And now I'll shut you up again and finish the rest of it while I'm red-hot. You know how that is, old girl. If they pull us off the scent there's a million things to destroy it. Good-by. The butcher'll come and leave your bone. If he puts it on the step, for God's sake don't claw the house down."

He shut her in and started running across the road through the woods, and Smilie, remembering the butcher whose day she knew, and apprehensive lest he forget the bone, sat on her tail and wept.

When Larry got to the Neales' front door, Hugh was there, lingering in the entry, on the point of going in to see his father, as his mother had begged him, and plainly hating to. He was ready to stand up to the dull business of trying to establish relations with a man who will consent to none; but when the man is flat and can't defend himself, it seemed unsportsmanlike.

"Hugh," said Larry, "do you think I could slip in there? Without disturbing your mother, I mean? Without routing out anybody?"

"I don't know," said Hugh. "Do you see him ordinarily? If you do — mother says he's having a good day."

"I've got something to say to him," said Larry. "But I couldn't possibly say it before anybody. I don't believe he'd answer me. They tell me he won't speak. But it's something he'd like, I bet you. Can't I?"

"Go ahead," said Hugh. "I'll keep mother out."

Larry opened the door softly, and was at once moved by the fallen estate of the man lying there and the solem-

nity of his impassive face, the eyes that met him with no shade of recognition. He could not let himself hesitate over the subtle suggestion of a soul fled from the impassive body or wonder whether it was a cruelty to rouse him. He stepped in, shut the door behind him and went up to the bed where he took the chair waiting for Mary in her endless visits. And now he did feel the dash of rebuff, because Neale did not turn the direct gaze of his eyes upon him, but kept it straightforward, as it had been, on the door. Larry had the baffled sense of being ignored, unseen indeed, and for that first instant wondered how he should begin, or if he must give it up, with a word of neighborly interest, and go. But something, some stir outside that told him Mary might be coming, hurried him into speech.

"Neale," said he, "I've got a business proposition to make to you. Tabitha's lot has come into my hands. I haven't actually got it, but I'm going to have it within forty-eight hours."

Slowly, unwillingly, Neale's eyes did forsake that point on the door and turned to him. Larry moved his chair slightly, to invite them to his the more readily, and at once he was satisfied that he had made the right step, the brilliant one, not necessarily to be successful, but obedient to the genius of events. He might not inspire the counter move from Neale, but at least he wasn't doing any harm. The man might not respond, but he was strong enough to bear the challenge.

"I shall sell it," said Larry. "At once. And for something near its actual worth. My brother didn't pay her its full worth. You won't be surprised. But I sha'n't let it go for less. I give you the first chance. Do you want it?"

The steady eyes were eloquent now. They were all interrogation of a sharp, insistent sort. Larry knew

perfectly well what they were saying. He knew, as Mary would have known, if she had been there, and that Mary would have made haste to answer. But he believed Tom Neale could speak if he would. The doctor had told the neighborhood that, in professional resentment over the man's obstinacy. Again the eyes turned toward the door and back to Larry, as if they were begging him.

"No," said Larry, yielding enough to own he understood, "I can't call her. Fact is, this is between you and me. If anybody comes in, I shall have to shut up and go. Do you want the lot?"

Neale opened his lips, slowly, as if some force within resisted as he dragged at them.

"How much?" said he.

Larry made haste to answer. He could imagine the man's voice sounded strange in his own ears, and that if the memory of it were allowed to keep on vibrating he would not venture it again.

"I've talked about it with several," said Larry. "That was before it came into my hands. Some, I'm inclined to think, overvalue it. You see, besides the worth of the timber it's such a handsome lot. The minute a man sets eyes on it he gets sort of carried away."

Neale pressed his lips together. Larry could well believe he was denying himself the impulse to tell what a handsome lot it was indeed, and how wildly desirous he was of taking it back under the family name.

"How much?" he asked again, and then forgot he was trying to bind himself to meager words and burst out in his old imperious way: "What'll ye sell it for?"

"Thirty-four hundred," said Larry. "That's a full six hundred under some of the estimates. I believe I could get four thousand, if I put it up at auction. Maybe more. It's known all over the township. I don't

know but it's known over the country. What do you say?"

Neale forgot why he was lying there and, in the heat of the moment, made a try — cruel waste of longing and the commanding of ineffective nerves — to raise himself on his elbow. In that instant of dickering with another man for dear possessive rights, he forgot his doom and thought he could throw himself out of bed and meet the world again. But there was no answer from his lost servitors, and he lay in blank misery and swore.

"That's right," said Larry. He thought he had never been so sorry in his life as for this tyrant in chains. "Cuss all you want to. It'll do you good."

But Neale had stopped thinking about that. He had learned the farther step in endurance: that chains must be ignored or they will crush you.

"Twenty-eight hunderd," said he.

"Sorry," said Larry, hardening his heart and reflecting that this was only money, not nerve and muscle, and the man must be denied. "Can't do it for a cent less."

"How'd it come into your hands?" asked Neale, in a curiosity Larry liked, it seemed so wholesome compared with a barren exile in bed cursing God, no doubt, and craving to die.

"He's making it over to me," he answered, "in consideration of — well, never mind. The fact is, 'Bial's interested in contributing to the war, and he hasn't enough ready money; so he's allowing me to sell the lot for him."

"The war?" said Neale. "Be we at war?"

"No," said Larry, "we're neutral and godly. But pretty nearly all the rest of the world is, and it's godly, too, some of it, in a different way. Don't you get the war news, Neale? I should admire to read it to you."

"She reads the papers," said Neale, "but I don't take

much stock in 'em. His letters — she reads them."

"Hugh's letters? Hugh's a great boy. He's going to make us proud, some day. You know he's going back, to fight?"

"He'd better stay where he is an' carry on the farm," said Neale.

"He can't," said Larry. "A fellow like that can't. You let him go,— and read the books he'll write and you'll be proud."

"I can't hinder his goin'," said Neale. "Three thousand."

"Can't do it," said Larry. "Not a cent under thirty-four hundred. Of course if you haven't the money —"

"I've got the money," said Neale, touched in his pride. "There's no trouble about the money. You send Pettis here to me an' I'll see about it."

"All right," said Larry. He got instantly on his feet. "Neale," said he, "for God's sake talk to your wife. Don't you see how she's changed since you've been sick? You've got to do something about it. The rest of us can't. Talk to her."

Neale did not answer. He had resumed his look at the door, not expectant, nothing so warm as that, but concentrated on the one spot opening into an outer life. But when Larry's hand was on the latch, he heard a little sound, a click of the tongue as if Neale had to call him but would choose any sound but an actual word. Larry turned back to him.

"Don't —" said Neale, and then hesitated.

"Don't tell?" asked Larry. He had tried the man far enough. He felt now ashamed, ashamed of himself for having legs to walk with or a hand to open the door. "You bet I won't tell, either what you pay besides one

dollar and other considerations or a word of the whole business. And I won't say I've seen you or that you've spoken to me. But, for God's sake, Neale, speak to your wife."

Then he did open the door and was gone. There was no one in the hall, but he heard Hugh talking to his mother from the room across the way, and got out of the front door in a cautious haste. Then it seemed to him he might as well run over and ask Ellen how she'd spent the night, and he crossed the orchard and went up the steps to her door. And on the upper step, with Mary Neale's parasol absurdly open over it, to shade it from the sun, he saw her little breakfast tray untouched. There were the rolls cooling, the coffee in its earthen pitcher, the cream risen to the top, the butter melted in the heat. Suddenly he was quick with fear, and ran up past the tray and knocked.

"Ellen!" he called. "Ellen, wake up."

But as he did it he knew she was not there to be waked, and though he tried the door, that he should find it locked. Without more calling or knocking after that first involuntary summons, he ran back across the orchard and through the Neale house from front door to kitchen before he found any one. There he came on Hugh, throwing out things from the closet under the stairs in search of an old hat. Hugh looked up and, seeing his face, stood expectant.

"What is it?" he asked. "Mother's just gone in to him."

"Ellen's breakfast," said Larry. He found himself breathless. "It's on the step. Where is she?"

"I put it there," said Hugh, as if the breakfast were the only thing to be considered. "She didn't answer and

I let her sleep. I came back and got an umbrella for it."

"She isn't asleep now," said Larry. "She isn't in the house."

As he spoke they had left the kitchen, and they went on through the shed and to the orchard path.

"How do you know she isn't in the house?" asked Hugh angrily.

"Because," said Larry, "she isn't, that's all. I'll tell you," he added, as they stopped before an open window and Hugh began slipping up the screen. "I'll go upstairs. No, you go. Call her, and then go up to her room, and if you don't find a little flag over the looking-glass it means she's gone."

"A flag?" repeated Hugh, from the other side of the window. "What flag?"

"A flag," said Larry, "over her looking-glass. If it's not there, she's gone for good."

XXXVII

Through the dark Ben followed her, sometimes faster as she hurried, sometimes slower when she slackened, and twice stopping altogether in the shade to make himself still as a tree, because he fancied she was looking round at him. And all the time his mind ran faster than the quickest imaginable pace of her frightened heart, debating one question: where could she be going? When they had climbed the long hill where Sally Wheeler's great square house sat grandly, he lost her. She seemed to have melted actually into the dark. And then, finding himself opposite the wide entrance, he suddenly understood. She had gone into the yard. She had either seen him and was hiding from him in the shrubbery or she was taking refuge with Sally Wheeler. And this last, he felt, in a concurrent relief, was the best thing she could do, if she must really throw over the Neales and kick them behind her in her flight. He went a few paces up the driveway and listened, and thought he heard voices. And certainly he saw the flashing of a light. He stole nearer still, to the slope in front of the house, and softly mounted the veranda steps. And there in the great front room he saw them, Sally Wheeler standing in the middle of the floor and Ellen before her, not droopingly as if she were exhausted, but, head thrown back, looking up into Sally Wheeler's face. And most pathetic of all seemed the small white bundle under her arm.

"Poor little devil!" said Ben to himself. And he went softly down the steps and turned back homeward.

When Ellen had run up the driveway, hurrying now with all her speed in the face of this last bit of her journey unaccomplished, she felt a sudden fear of being snatched back and dropped again into the doubtful conditions she had fled from. But there in the house was a hospitable light. One of her fears, she realized now, was lest Sally Wheeler should have gone to bed early, with the country foresight of "a hard day to-morrow." She hurried the more and as she ran up the veranda steps the light went out and an electric torch flashed blindingly.

"Who's that?" came Sally Wheeler's voice. In another instant, while Ellen was falling involuntarily back: "Why, it's you, Ellen Brock. No, you're Ellen Neale now, aren't you? Let me light the lamp again. Come in."

Ellen walked in and Sally Wheeler, who had sworn roundly because the hot lamp chimney burned her, had the light immediately, and Ellen stopped before her and looked up in her face and said:

"I've been married, you know. But I've run away."

She could not perhaps have told the difficult fact to anybody in the entire world who would have taken it more as a matter of course than Sally Wheeler. You might have thought her a committee of one especially appointed for the reception of fugitive brides.

"Of course," she said. "That's right. Is that your nightie? Put it down here. Have you had your supper?"

Ellen did put down her little bundle and seated herself in a low soft chair that received her kindly; and because her troubles seemed to be over she trembled a little but, resolving against it, did not cry. Sally

Wheeler began pulling down the shades. Then she locked the great front door and shot the heavy bolt.

"It's getting cool," she said, coming back to the fireplace. "We'll have a blaze."

She touched off the fire laid with light sticks for a quick flare, and Ellen put her hands to it gratefully.

"It's nice," she said. "Though I'm not cold. I hurried."

"I like it," said Sally Wheeler, "about this time of night." She took her own chair again by the table, and kept on, giving Ellen's intentions, if she had any, time to clarify. "You must think I'm a fool, flashing my torch on you like that. I'm a queer old woman. As long as I've lived, I've never got over the feeling there's somebody behind me. So I keep my torch handy, and my little six-shooter's here in the drawer."

"I should think you'd have locked the door then," said Ellen absently. She was wondering how she could tell why she had come. And really, why had she come?

"No," said Sally Wheeler. "I draw the line. I may be a coward, but I won't act like one. Well?" she ended suddenly. "Well? so you've run away."

"It's nobody's fault," said Ellen, rousing herself to the issue. "Nobody's but mine. I said I'd marry him and I did. And then it looked different to me, and I wouldn't stay. But we haven't quarreled. Nobody's been wrong — but me."

"God bless you!" said Sally Wheeler fervently and, so far as Ellen's understanding went, irrelevantly. "Is that all?"

"No, it's not all," said Ellen desperately. "Hugh came home."

"I heard so," Sally Wheeler nodded. "Then what?"

"Then —" said Ellen. But how to tell it! The thing was unthinkable. She had known Hugh all her life; he had been away and come back again and had bewitched her.

"I see," said Sally Wheeler, and she used these very words. "He's bewitched you. Well, you know there is witchcraft in it, what they call love. And it's right. It's necessary. Do you suppose if women weren't under a spell they would suffer all they do for men — their tyrannies and their neglects — and bear children for them and be glad to do it? I used to sit here nights thinking about it, and sometimes I've got so bewitched myself, just thinking, that the biggest thing anybody could do seemed to be loving some man enough to die for him. That slow way, I mean: by inches."

"Yes," said Ellen, all aflame.

"But it isn't. You've got to understand it's witchcraft," said Sally Wheeler. She put out her beautiful hands to the fire as if she were invoking a spell. "You must remember it's the earth that's got hold of you as she gets hold of the buds in the spring, and you'll think you'd rather die than not mind what she tells you. But don't you mind her, Ellen Brock, unless you're going to do what the others tell you, too."

"Who are the others?" asked Ellen. She was fascinated by the passionate singsong of the thin resonant voice, and by the waving rhythm of the hands that trembled before the blaze.

"The ones that went before you. The folks, Ellen, the plain folks that worked and fought — some of 'em — and made their mistakes and went hungry — starved to death, some of these New England fathers and mothers for want of happy things — a little music, a little dancing and laughing at nothing — and held their tongues and

never complained, and brought you and me out of nowhere to take their places. All their hungers, their poor splendid sacrifices — sometimes when I sit here at night I cry over 'em, and I feel as if they'd bought us with a price."

"You mean," said Ellen, groping, "I mustn't love Hugh."

"God sakes!" said Sally Wheeler, a round New England oath she had heard in cases where nothing else would do. "No! I mean you must run your legs off to get away from the man you don't love, and then run twice as far to get away from the man you love. Don't let the earth seize hold of you, Ellen Brock. For instance, I dare say you'd rather die than have Ben even kiss you —"

"Yes," flamed Ellen, sure now she understood.

"Well," said Sally Wheeler, "die then, rather than do it. But don't kiss Hugh."

"But I did," said Ellen, "when he came home." Her face went white and glorious, remembering.

"I'm glad of it," said Sally Wheeler. "But don't do it again. Ellen, I don't know what I should have said to you if you'd told me this before the war. I dare say I should have lent you a horse — not Henry, poor dear! — and told you and Hugh to ride off through the horizon somewhere and die together. I'm an awful old woman when it's true love. But since the war began, I really believe I've seen up into the stars, and down through the middle of the earth. And the thing I've seen clearest is the sacredness of the soil you were born on and the duty you owe to the dead that worked on it and died for it. You can't be unfaithful. You can't. That's what they mean by being a traitor. I never was so sick at heart as I am now at the indignities they've done America — muffled, gagged, belied. I can't talk about it. But do

you know what I think, Ellen Brock? I believe there's something over and above what we call America, and that they can't down. The politician that only wants to get votes out of her — he can't down her. And these men round here that don't know there's a war going on till you scream it at 'em — they can't down her. And when the minute comes she'll get up and — my God, Ellen Brock! she'll take the sword."

Sally Wheeler got up. She looked tall, standing there on her hearth stretching her slender body up to the top flame of her prophetic fire. Ellen rose, too. They seemed to be saluting something intangible — America, the goddess that had been lost awhile, obscured by traitorous interpretations. Sally Wheeler came, as it were, to herself. She sank back to her stature of old. She looked at Ellen and smiled whimsically.

"My!" said she. "I believe I made a speech. Pretty fair, too. Well, Ellen, the conclusion of the whole matter is — we've got to forget what we want and work like the devil for the things the world has got to have. Will you go to France?"

"Yes," said Ellen instantly. "That's what I came here for. I didn't know exactly, when I came. But I knew you'd know."

"Now," said Sally Wheeler, "we'll go to bed. In the morning maybe I'll send you off to Boston to somebody you'll like. She'll get you ready. And I'll see Larry and tell him. And your Hugh. Poor Ben, too! I'll see him."

They went upstairs together to the great guest room which looked as if it had made itself exquisitely ready for an Ellen who needed the arms of welcome. Here again Sally Wheeler lighted a little kind fire, and as she left

Ellen she stopped before her and put one of the slender old hands on her shoulder.

"Sure you mean it?" she asked. "It's enlisting, you know."

"Yes," said Ellen steadily. "I'm sure."

"Sure you love Hugh?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell him. Sure you can get along without kissing him good-by? That's what the earth's screaming out there, you know. Hear?" The wind was coming in variable gusts.

"Yes," said Ellen, "and I'm sure. But you'll tell him — you'll tell him —" There she broke, and turned her face aside.

"God bless you, yes," said Sally Wheeler. "I'll tell him. And some day, so shall you."

But Ellen was quiet now, and dignified in the way she loved in Mary Neale.

"Tell him," said she, "my love. And —'remember.'"

"Yes," said Sally Wheeler, "'remember.'"

On that she went, and Ellen soberly dried her cheeks of tears and undressed by the kind fire and went into the soft bed. And in spite of the calling earth and the reminding wind, she went to sleep at once and dreamed wonderfully, the sort of dream that is so exquisite and so clear that it lasts over into the real; and the stranger was a stranger no longer but actually Hugh.

XXXVIII

Hugh came running down the stairs to Larry, waiting for him in the kitchen. Larry stood looking at the floor. He knew what knot they had to untangle, and he could not bear to meet the conjecture of it in Hugh also. But he had to look at him, since Hugh didn't speak at once, and the sight of his face was strange, the pallor of it under its tan.

"Nobody's slept up there," said he. "Anyway, it's empty now." And then, as Larry continued to gaze at him: "No, there wasn't any flag. What do you care about a flag?"

Larry didn't answer, and they turned together, unlocked the back door and went out, and Larry put the key under the stone. They stood for a minute looking down at the untouched tray at their feet, and Hugh, as if he had suddenly determined upon it, took up the pitcher and poured the coffee away and then threw the rolls off behind the lilac bushes. Larry closed the parasol that lay there making its spot of shade and put it under his arm while Hugh took up the tray.

"There's no need of mother's knowing," said Hugh tentatively, "— yet."

"No," said Larry. "No need of anybody's knowing."

"I'll harness up," said Hugh.

"Where'll you go?" asked Larry. He felt himself breaking into a sweat of fright. His mind seemed to break, too. It trembled and refused its sane offices.

"I don't know," said Hugh. "To Beckenham — the station. That's the obvious thing."

They stopped there, with one idea, for Ben stood waiting in the orchard path, evidently for them, and they didn't want him in their councils, they couldn't consider him even. Hugh, as he neared him, didn't know how he felt toward Ben and at that moment didn't care. There seemed to be no time to settle on an appropriate way of taking him: for Ellen had gone, and in view of that Ben was no more than an irritating speck of dust in the wind of their apprehension. He was serious, evidently not angry, kind. Ellen had gone, and her repudiation of him no longer stung and hurt. He'd rather, he was sure, be friends with Hugh. Larry didn't matter, but Hugh looked rather fine to him, grown up and pledged to that awful thing "over there." His eye was caught by the tray.

"What d'you do that for?" he asked. "Oh! for mum. You needn't. I've told her."

"Told her what?" demanded Hugh.

"Where Ellen's gone."

"Where is she?" asked Larry quietly. The whole uproar of their anxiety and their fears seemed ebbing because Ben was inexplicably calm.

"She ran away, last night," said Ben. "I saw her in the road. I followed her."

Hugh set down the tray as if he wanted his hands free, and he was frowning the more heavily, not to signal his hostility to Ben, but because he had to fix his mind on what was coming and steady himself to meet it. Larry's eyes, too, were on Ben, but he did not speak. Ben turned sick, at their distrust of him, their waiting on his words as if they expected betrayal of some sort, cowardly confession. He answered their unspoken fear.

"Why, what do you s'pose I followed her for?" he said hotly. "I saw her by chance. I couldn't let her

go running along the road like that, could I, and not know where she's going? She didn't see me. If she did, it wasn't my fault." He faced them, red to his hair, fronting them with miserable, angry eyes.

"Well?" said Hugh. "Out with it."

Then Ben realized he hadn't told them.

"Why," he said, "she stopped at Sally Wheeler's. I went up the drive and saw her through the window. And she had her bundle. And 'twas all right."

Larry absurdly thought of asking if the bundle seemed to be a flag, and then he wondered if he were going to cry. Hugh took up the tray again. He was not frowning now, and he felt weakly as if all the great safeties had risen up and stretched out arms to Ellen.

"Give it here," said Ben. "Want to favor your arm, I s'pose."

He spoke gruffly and Hugh answered on the same note — a masculine unison of understanding.

"Oh, that's all right. Yes, you might take it, though."

Larry turned aside and leaped the wall to go off down the lane and through the woods to Smilie, and Hugh and Ben went home together. Mary was waiting for them, anxiously, they saw, and Hugh thought it best to have it out with her, once for all. They walked up to her together.

"We sha'n't wrastle again, mum," said he, in the language of Trueman, who had taught them. "Not till I come home for good."

Mary understood and opened the door to them. But only Ben went in. Hugh vanished from her sight, he went so fast, out into the road, striding his quickest to his love.

When he went up Sally Wheeler's drive he saw the light

wagon before him, vanishing past the end of the house to the great barn in the rear. The hired man, Henry's successor, was driving, and Sally herself, he found, with another step, was on the veranda, a light shawl — rose-pink China crêpe, richly embroidered — about her shoulders. She was in white, under the shawl, and for an instant, when he caught the dazzle of the dress and the pink blooming over it, he thought it was Ellen herself sat there, all love and loveliness. But that veil, woven of his quick hopes, fell at once, and he took off his hat to Sally Wheeler who was calling him.

"Come up here," said she, "and sit down. I was waiting for you. I knew you'd come."

Hugh went up the steps and she gave him her hand and, because she did not seem inclined to begin until he obeyed, he sat down before her. She looked at him in a frank admiration. And he was a fine sight, Hugh, with strength flaunting itself all over him and hope in his eyes.

"To think you've grown up to this!" said she. "And I remember you as a heavy sort of youngster and then a sulky boy."

Hugh laughed and made himself the more beguiling.

"I wasn't sulky — really," he said.

"No, I suppose not — only bashful. But you looked as if you wanted things and thought you could get them with your fists."

"Where is she?" he asked, bending forward to her and speaking, if not peremptorily, with an implication that they both understood equally he'd got to know.

"Oh!" said Sally Wheeler. "No more patience than that? Well, I won't plague you. She's gone, young man. I sent her. And if you behave and she behaves, you won't see her again till she's got out of that foolish bargain she walked into with Ben. O poor boy!" she

cried, suddenly remorseful at his smitten face. "I didn't mean to be so murderous. But she's gone. Henry just came back from carrying her to the train."

Hugh got up and walked to the end of the veranda and stood there a few minutes, his back to her. She did not look at him, but the fine old hands lying in her lap trembled upon each other. He turned and came to her.

"Where?" he asked.

"Nowhere for you to find her," said Sally Wheeler, shaking her head miserably and carefully removing a tear from each eye. "But I'll tell you where she's going to be. In France."

She was looking at him now, and she found his face altogether glorified. This was the way Ellen, too, had looked, and she exulted in them and at the same time despaired of keeping them apart.

"That," said he irrepressibly, "is where I shall be."

She knew she had to wipe out the ingenuous triumph of his smile.

"But she's not going to be there," she went on, holding herself to her task, and this was to show no mercy to him, "for you to make any sort of hole-and-corner union with."

He looked angry at that, haughty, too, and she was nervous over what she had embarked on.

"Nor," said she, "for you to sentimentalize over and cry for. And make her cry for you. You two have got to keep your minds on your work. I don't believe you'd better write to each other, come to that."

Sally Wheeler then began and delivered an address, the like of which he had never heard nor compassed in his own imagination. It was all about love, a state which she had poetically imagined, but which, according

to her, was less earthly delight than pure sense and even heroism. It walked upon the earth, though its head was among the stars. And heretofore, according to her, everybody had been more or less unhappy in the pursuit of it because passion is of the earth and dies down like the flowers thereof, and heavenly obedience is the fruit we eat to everlasting life. And it was her theory that men and women, by desiring high things that can with peril be come by, would forget their longing for the earthly delights that perish. And the hunger of woman for being enthroned in worship and the bewilderment of man because he can never assure her a ritual such as she has heard chanted in her dreams, came only from a glorifying of the passion which is purely of earth and a forgetfulness of the duties that are of the stars. Hugh sat brooding. Did he hear her at all? She could not guess.

"Write a poem about it," she ended weakly. "Larry Greene says you're a poet."

"No," said Hugh quietly. "I sha'n't write poetry about it."

"Good heavens!" cried Sally Wheeler, irritated beyond control by his quietude, the impossibility of getting at him and finding out whether she had moved or only irreparably wounded him, "do say something. Tell me whether I'm right or wrong."

"Oh," said Hugh, rising and standing before her, still with that dazed and extraordinarily gentle implication of giving up, of having no more resistance in him, "of course you're right. That's understood."

"Then," said Sally Wheeler, "I'll give you her address — not now, but before you sail. If you'll play fair. Not write her love-letters, not tempt her — well, if

you're wounded or lose an arm or anything I s'pose you'd tempt her then —'send for her or something wrong and — natural."

"No," said Hugh, "not even then."

She looked up at him and found he was smiling at her. This was about the best thing that had ever happened to Sally Wheeler. Youth had understood her, not in a way of vague speculation but actually, with a clarity that implied something in return. And the precise thing to be required of it was the dogged, wholly unembellished act and series of acts involved in standing by the rules. Hugh was going out into his moral warfare not according to the old ideal of war, with the bugles' flare and banners flying, but to be in the trenches with sodden feet because he was one of the innumerable army that fights — and fights together and blindly trusts something is to be built on the structure of concurrent wills.

He was turning away to leave her and she held him back a moment. She had to give him Ellen's message. How to do it! Because it was not so much the words as the look of her eyes, the mute insistence of her will that he should surely understand.

"She said: 'Tell him, my love — my love. Tell him, remember.'"

"Oh!" said Hugh, in an indescribable little sound of longing, hope, delight. He looked beyond her, and though it was only into the green at the end of the veranda, she suddenly felt he saw Ellen coming toward him and had her old creepy sense of somebody behind her. He stood up even straighter. He might have been receiving an order he took gladly. "Remember!" he said. "I will."

Then he went away, with an air of being bent single-mindedly upon a duty or a quest, and Sally Wheeler saw

him no more before he sailed. But she did see Larry and they talked beyond midnight by her hearth, and he took the last news of Ellen to Ben and got it over hurriedly, it seemed so difficult to tell. But Ben listened and said nothing, and later that day he and Hugh came down to Larry's together and talked about the war.

It was after Hugh had sailed that Lawyer Pettis sent for Larry to come to him in his office, and following that interview Larry did not go home but to Thomas Neale's where he knocked and asked Mary if he might see her husband. She looked at first doubtful, but nothing could overset her completely since Lawyer Pettis had come, a couple of days before, and told her Neale had sent for him and asked for the "little tin box," and pen and ink that her husband might sign his name. Pettis had gone briskly away, with a civil word to her. And now Larry had come, as mysteriously. She went in to her husband and reappeared at once, to say he was expected. She thought so, at least. Thomas had looked that way. They went in together, and at another of Neale's glances she left them and sat down to her work by the sitting-room window, bewildered and a little hurt and proud. It did wound her, in a way she thought unreasonable, to know she had bent every faculty and her soul's energy toward translating the dumb intelligence there in the bed, and that now, at some trying moment — for that it was an ordeal his look told her — he did not need her to interpret between him and other men. She sat there and sewed, and she could hear a murmur of voices, the two in short question and reply. In half an hour perhaps Larry came out and went directly to the front door and away. He must have seen her, she was sure, sewing at her window. There was an implication of se-

crecy, something, she concluded, she was not to know. And because her heart was still sore from Hugh's going, and apprehensive over Ben who had his fits of silence and was never "silly" in the old way, she felt this little estrangement from the sick room the more keenly, and sat and hugged it to her and told herself, though not in words, that it was a lonesome world. She heard Aunt Tab out under the side window pulling the grass from the yellow iris, in a happy futility, and crooning her formless song, and suddenly she realized she had ceased being sorry for Tabitha who looked now alert and free, and curiously jubilant, as if the world had come round to her at last, and that she was densely and shamelessly sorry for herself. The minutes went by in the depth of that vitiating self-pity. It seemed to have got hold of her like a quick-growing mildew, stilled her normal kind impulses and thinned her blood. She got up suddenly from her chair as if the evil mood were a low-lying vapor and she could get her head above it and escape. Neale had been too long alone and, in remorseful haste, she crossed the hall, opened the door softly and went in to him. His eyes met hers as they always did when she entered their field, and were with her as she approached the bed.

"Sit down," said he. He spoke quite naturally and without emphasis, as if his speaking were not the most marvelous thing in the world to her, second only to her wonder if he had risen and walked. "Greene has bought me back the lot. Here's the deed. You take it an' put it in the little tin trunk. You know where the key is."

She drew the paper from under his hand and sat there holding it, her heart beating suffocatingly and her lips afire to talk and talk, to ask him if he would keep on speaking to her, to tell him, if he did not she must, plainly, die.

"Don't you tell," said he.

"Tabbie?" she asked. "Don't you want she should know you've got it back?"

"I don't care nothin' about Tab," said he. It was incredible to her, and she told herself afterward he didn't really say it and he didn't really smile. "God! I never shall forget how she looked that day I had my fall. I lay here when I'm alone, thinkin' about it."

He laughed in a queer unwonted way, and Mary laughed hysterically until she cried a little, remembering there had never been time for him to see how funny things were. Now he had time. And instantly, in her tenderness over his miserable state, she forgot her own self-pity and the mildew that had been choking her and was all trembling pity and thankfulness that she was his. Who else could ever have understood?

"What is it," she asked, "you don't want me to tell?"

"Don't have folks in here houndin' me," he said. "You know."

Yes, she knew. He didn't want the neighborhood to know he could talk to it. He wanted to stay stranded in his isolation — but with her. She and he were to live alone in the house of intimacy they had built together in the old days of their love, and for an instant, in the flooding happiness of being there with him, she was fiercely glad no one else could enter. She understood. His only possible way of bearing his misfortune was to bear it alone — but with her. For the moment she forgot her children and what they could be to him if he would let them, forgot how meagerly his life must move if he continued to shut himself away. She had a sense of unquenchable power — the mother spirit that hopes all things and scoffs at the impossible. She knew she could interpret between him and life, between him and God un-

til such time — but Mary Neale never talked to herself about the march of the soul. She inarticulately believed in it and acted as if she believed.

"But we'll talk, you and I," she said timidly, with the shyness of the bride. "I'll tell you things and you tell me."

"Yes," he said. She thought he smiled a little. "I may not be round here very long —"

"I sha'n't be here long after you," said Mary. "I couldn't live —"

She stopped and kissed him timidly, yet with a shy, believing rapture. It was the kiss of the bride.

THE END

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